



N. KOTENKO

Valentin Rasputin

Soviet Writers Today Soviet Writers Today Soviet

V. Rasputin

Essays

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Translated by *Holly Smith*



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NIKOLAI KOTENKO

Valentin Rasputin

On the River Angara in Siberia, about halfway between the cities of Irkutsk and Bratsk is the village of Ust-Uda. A street seems to emerge from the river by the small wharf. Ascending steeply from the bank, it winds through the center of a pleasant village lined on either side by sturdy houses built of larch, a few local offices, a canteen, and a lone store...

In 1937, when Valentin Rasputin was born here, the river was narrower, and the street was longer. In place of the staid expanses of the man-made Sea of Bratsk, which appeared after the construction of the Bratsk Electric Power Station, were vast collective farm fields under plough.

This bit of information is essential to any understanding of Valentin Rasputin as a writer, for although he is thoroughly urbane, since he grew up and attended the university in the thriving city of Irkutsk, his roots are here in this village, and he is still the son of a peasant at heart. Within him dwells an humble kindness and inalienable love of the soil, of planting time and harvest, when the days are never long enough. He has never lost his gentle affection for quiet backwaters and the simple cares of a farmer which were so much

a part of his early childhood.

Rasputin's biography is a straightforward one, and his literary career is enviable indeed. He attended school in Irkutsk, then graduated from the history and philology department of Irkutsk University. During his college years, he worked for the youth newspaper. One day, the editor-in-chief noticed a sketch he had written. This later evolved into the short story, "I Forgot to Ask Lyoshka", published in the almanac *Angara* in 1961, marking the beginning of Rasputin's admirable career as the author of superb fiction.

After finishing the university, he worked as a reporter for the Irkutsk television studio, and subsequently, as a correspondent for the Krasnoyarsk youth newspaper. Soon he returned to Irkutsk for good and decided upon a career as a fiction writer—a choice he has stuck with ever since.

In the fall of 1965, in the Siberian city of Chita, a seminar for young writers of Eastern Siberia and the Soviet Far East was held. Rasputin's short stories evoked great interest, and although he had not yet published a book proper, he was recommended for membership in the Soviet Writers' Union. Eager readers did not have long to wait, for a book by Rasputin appeared the very next year: a collection of short stories and sketches entitled *The Land Near the Edge of the Earth* was put out by Irkutsk Publishers. Another volume of short stories appeared in 1967 in Krasnoyarsk. A mere decade later, Valentin Rasputin was known the world over as the author of such novellas as *Money for Maria* (1967), *Borrowed Time* (1970), *Live and Remember* (1975), and *Farewell to Matyora* (1976). His work won the approval of his renowned colleagues Mikhail Sholokhov and Leonid Leonov; Sergei Zalygin wrote the introduction to a

one-volume collection of his previously published works. Rasputin's books have been translated into many foreign languages, and the author himself has travelled extensively in Europe and has visited the United States.

Recognition of Rasputin's creative efforts has taken the form of editions of his books running into millions of copies. In addition, there are a number of stage and screen versions of his works, and he received the State Prize of the USSR for the novella *Live and Remember*. In 1986, at the most recent congress of the Writers' Union of the USSR Rasputin was elected secretary of this prestigious organization.

In 1985, Rasputin's novella *Fire* came out. In a certain sense, it is a summary of all his previous works. Before this volume appeared, he published some short stories: "Live and Love", "What to Tell the Raven" and "Natasha", which revealed many new facets of his talent and provided much food for thought.

A true patriot of his native region, Rasputin is extremely concerned about the future of his beloved Siberia with its breathtaking natural beauty and wealth of natural resources. He wages a never-ending campaign in meetings with scientists and on the pages of the press, where his hard-hitting, uncompromising articles demand more stringent conservation legislation to protect his land's awesome rivers and virgin forests. First and foremost, he is concerned with the preservation of that most remarkable gem of Eastern Siberia, the pride of the whole country, Lake Baikal, the largest and deepest fresh-water lake in the world.

Of course, everything in Siberia is a bit out of the ordinary: first of all, the enormous distances and the resulting methods and means of communications and

contacts between people; the lovely hills of volcanic rock which reflect all the colors and tints of nature; the swift rivers with water purer than that of the clearest mineral spring. There are a multitude of fish found nowhere else in the world, making Siberia a paradise for any angler or connoisseur. But most wonderful of all is the unique, priceless Lake Baikal, really a fresh-water sea in size, which is so vast the awe-struck visitor cannot rest his gaze on any particular spot too long for fear of missing another view even more spectacular. Baikal is so large that even if the visitor had a hundred-fold more time at his disposal, it would still be impossible for him to see everything.

Despite the formidable distance—Irkutsk is over five thousand kilometers from Moscow—I visit that city more often than I do Leningrad. I suppose there is the subconscious feeling that Leningrad is so close that I can go there anytime. But there is another reason why I am so enamored of Irkutsk.

I first visited this bustling Siberian city on the Angara River more than twenty years ago. The writers of Irkutsk were just beginning to make a name for themselves in literature on a national level, yet their fresh and energetic style had already been noticed, and they were the topic of heated debates among the literary circles. Needless to say, critics and readers alike had high hopes for them, and frankly speaking, were even a bit in awe of them...

The most unforgettable impression of my first meeting with these writers was surprise at their highly developed sense of unity and cohesion, at the solidarity, if I may express it in such a manner, which existed between these (then still young) prosaists. I say prosaists because a number of fine young writers were

working precisely in this genre. (At this point, we will not put playwright Alexander Vampilov in a separate category). Unexpectedly, like a bolt from the blue, this powerful, unified group—almost all of about the same age—made their voices heard on the literary scene. A new term appeared in Soviet literary criticism: “Irkutsk prose”. And today, more than two decades later, we see that this coinage was justified, for the school continues to flourish. These young writers shared everything, all their joys and sorrows, and the overcoming of any “obstacle” proved a cause for celebration for them all. And another breath of fresh air: their open-hearted and expansive natures lacked even a hint of guile. It was as if certain facets of their characters were dictated, in the good sense of the word, by the vastness of their native land, so infinitely beautiful, yet at the same time, so merciless and severe.

I have no desire to offend anyone from the older generation of writers, but at that time, there was the feeling that in Irkutsk, an active, fully independent organization of young writers existed, and it had an extremely healthy attitude towards the role of literature in social progress.

One or two works by each of them—Gennady Mashkin, Vyacheslav Shugayev, Gennady Nikolayev, and Valentin Rasputin—had been put out by one or another of the country’s major publishing houses. All of these pieces without exception had met with praise from critics throughout the land. There was no sense of repetitiveness among them; nor were their works in any sense derivative or influenced by their constant close association with their friends and colleagues. Each approached the lonely task of writing in his own fashion. They were still getting themselves established

in the literary world in those days, and now it is rather difficult to sort out "cause and effect": perhaps their friendship, the ceaseless exchange on matters, both creative and mundane, facilitated the maturation of their talent. Or it might have been the other way around: the necessity of finding their place under the sun and in literature may have dictated the formation of that pure, selfless community of like spirits. But without a doubt, this close association proved fruitful for one and all.

When in Moscow, they spoke of their home with cool reserve, but they would go rushing back to Irkutsk all of a sudden, for no apparent reason, leaving business unfinished and loose ends untied. These unpredictable flights back were the only way in which they betrayed their nostalgia and longing for their distant homeland.

In Irkutsk they always gave their guests quite a reception: they would immediately abandon their work and put aside all personal problems, no matter how pressing. This sacrifice of their own time—a sincere and utterly selfless gesture—was always filled with a profound love of their native land and with the expansive pride which is an invariable part of the true Siberian character.

On my first trip there, they took me to the taiga—or to be more precise, we walked there. We spent several days at a small lodge beside the tiny Kharat Creek, which I would never have noticed among the multitude of others on the map. For me, the experience was an unforgettable one. After that, we went to Lake Baikal and spent a few more days there. And the thing to keep in mind here is that I am far from the only person who comes to Irkutsk on business or just for a visit.

In the years that followed my memorable first visit to the city, they parted ways: some left Irkutsk, and others have suffered or are suffering from writer's block. But in any case, their marvelous fellowship became a thing of the past. Perhaps I am wrong, and it is possible that they would not agree with me themselves, but I think one of the reasons for this was the untimely death of playwright Alexander Vampilov (1937-1972) who penned such terse and controversial psychological dramas as *The Elder Son*, *The Duck Hunt*, and *Last Summer in Chulimsk*.

Even now, as I write of Valentin Rasputin, the most talented Irkutsk prosaist and one of the leading contemporary Soviet authors, I cannot help but think of his dearest friend, kind but demanding, and ever a merry soul—a talented and serious playwright who did much to determine and influence the course of development of Soviet theater in the '70s and '80s.

The graveness of this loss can be seen on the faces of his old friends, for they all began their careers at the same time he did, and he was the binding personality in their group. He was more than a talented playwright and the heart of the fellowship: he was the focal point and cohesive force of this association of gifted writers. He abhorred any kind of intolerance, but his strict and demanding attitude toward the writer's most fundamental task was well known.

Alexander Vampilov perished in August 1972 on the very eve of his thirty-fifth birthday... On a clear September afternoon just before twilight, Valentin Rasputin and I climbed the steep hill that begins right at the steps of his small cottage at the Baikal Port. My companion pointed out the exact spot where the accident occurred: it was at the very

mouth of the Angara not far from the village of Listvyanka.

Alexander Vampilov's heart gave out only a few yards from the bank he was swimming for after his boat hit a snag and capsized...

It is to Vampilov that Rasputin owes his decision to return from Krasnoyarsk to Irkutsk, and I am sure this is not the only instance in which he is indebted to the playwright. Many fine features of his character were formed in the course of that friendship. They were close in their world views, their presentation of those views, and in the moral imperatives they put forth. Vampilov was Rasputin's dearest friend, colleague, and mentor. Even now, years after Vampilov's tragic death, when I spend time with Rasputin, I feel that his old friend, this wonderful person and fine playwright lives on, and not just in his writing.

...As the darkness thickened and a chill pierced the air, Rasputin and I descended to the shore of the lake. The night where almost absolute silence, except for the music of nature, had reigned but a few years before, was now filled with the ceaseless bustle of a busy port, for things had picked up considerably here due to the construction of the Baikal-Amur Railway. So there we were in the midst of the creaking and rumbling of cranes and the noisy signaling of ships. We stood there for a moment, then returned to the cozy cottage with its warm stove and closed shutters. The transistor radio purring in the next room created the impression of a realm quite divorced from the quotidian.

Rasputin is taciturn in general, but in certain situations—like this one—he is especially reserved, afraid to break the silence. It might seem strange that a person whose occupation depends on his mastery of the writ-

ten word, a man who bares his soul on paper to express reality precisely and succinctly, should be so reserved, laconic even. I remember being stunned by Rasputin's maxim, which seemed paradoxical at first, a play of wit of sorts. He said then that a sanguine individual, one who was unnecessarily glib or talkative was more likely to be conformist, to compromise his ideas, and to make concessions than a person who was more reserved, more circumspect, and obviously, more unsure of himself.

This is what Rasputin had to say about Vampilov's work: "He never tried to invent any new truths. He simply put the old ones in the context of the modern world, and suddenly, they had quite a different ring to them. The themes he dealt with were eternal as day and night, problems we never tire of pondering, such as life and death, love and hate, happiness and grief, honor and responsibility. Every new era lends its own unique features to these concepts. They distinguish the period but remain unaltered themselves in all their complexity and delicacy. The love of one person for another meant the same thing a thousand years ago as it does today, but how is that love experienced and expressed now? What is the content of that first moment of feeling for and awareness of another? How does it enrich the bearer of those feelings, and what must that person suffer for the sake of this love? How long will it last? As long as a single person is alive, he or she will love and hate, fear and court death at the same time, as no one has done before..." This comment on the eternal questions applies equally to Rasputin and to anyone who engages in the process of creative writing in general. But to understand fully what Rasputin means, to see the moral demands he makes upon his heroes, himself,

and us as well, and to hear his answers, we have no choice but to read his books thoughtfully and unhurriedly. True enough, digesting what he writes is not always an easy task, since Rasputin has no intention of providing light entertainment for his readers.

His reserve is not a sign of emotionless equilibrium and calm. Impulsive and always the rebel, Rasputin is considerate almost to a fault about keeping his personal problems to himself and not burdening those who are close to him. This constant fear of being a burden to someone is accompanied by an equally incessant desire to be of assistance in whatever way he can.

On some levels, his character may seem contradictory, for the modesty and hesitation he displays in personal matters do not extend to what is paramount and most important in his life. After graduating from the university, he could have pursued a steady career as a journalist at a newspaper, but he preferred the uncertain, insecure life of a young and unknown writer: he devoted himself entirely to fiction.

Every time he leaves Moscow, Rasputin takes a large suitcase of books with him. The employees of used book shops in Leningrad and the capital know him well. His library is not limited to the narrow sphere of belles lettres but contains serious works on history and folklore, literary criticism, and the volumes of young, promising writers. Rasputin is also a familiar figure at all of Moscow's theaters, not just because several plays based on one or another of his works are part of their repertoires, but rather because directors are eager to hear his opinion. So he frequents not only performances but rehearsals, final run-throughs, and opening nights. Moreover, he is well acquainted with both Soviet and foreign cinematography.

In the fall of 1976, he and the late writer Yuri Trifonov accepted an invitation to the book fair at Frankfurt-on-Main, and he returned with two elegantly bound volumes—German editions of his novellas *Live and Remember* and *Borrowed Time*. These were neither the first nor the last such editions, for translations of his works have appeared in all the socialist countries, as well as in Italy, France, West Germany, and Finland; he has been published in the USA and Japan.

Of all the modern Soviet writers considered living classics in their time, Rasputin is the last to have come into his own. When Vasily Belov, Viktor Astafiev, Fyodor Abramov were already well-known authors whose names were invariably mentioned in any and all serious discussions of contemporary Soviet literature, Rasputin was just starting out. It was not simply the whim of literary critics who attached the name of this young writer to that venerable list; even in Rasputin's early stories and novellas, his older colleagues were quick to notice his gift and recognize him as their equal. In some measure, they were his mentors as well, a fact he readily admits. But if we analyse objectively their "literary" relations, which we can do rather easily since enough time has passed and all have written sufficient quantities to allow us to make some judgements in this case, we can conclude that Rasputin was never anyone's apprentice in the strict sense of the word. His very first publications allowed him to take his place as an equal among equals, while his "elders" accepted him without any reservations.

Literature is not a school wherein each pupil advances from grade to grade, constantly drawing nearer to the desired result, for in writing, not

everyone manages to accumulate the necessary degree of knowledge. There are many instances in the history of literature when a young gifted writer has turned everything upside down, forcing not a few experienced authors and critics to reexamine the contents of their own works.

In general, one phenomenon which enhances progress in literature and proves very fruitful within the context of each individual's creative efforts is friendship among writers. Rasputin was very close to the late Fyodor Abramov. And Rasputin, Belov, Astafiev, and Vasil Bykov always keep in touch; they send their new manuscripts to each other, and despite the enormous distances involved, visit each other quite frequently.

Rasputin takes great pains with his manuscripts, working and reworking them time and again. News of a forthcoming publication will already have appeared in literary journals, and publishing houses will have had it listed in their plans far in advance. The author will already have delivered the manuscript to his editor in Moscow when suddenly, he will decide that something is not quite right: the piece is incomplete, and it must be fixed up immediately. Then, despite his editor's objections, he will fly home forthwith, manuscript in hand, only to spend weeks or even months rewriting whatever did not please him at the last minute. His throes of composition are intermingled with joy, but it is a sense of joy and satisfaction one will never see in his eyes, even after a new work has hit the bookstores and become a bestseller. If given the chance, he would rewrite things that came out a decade ago. In the interview which appeared in *Literaturnaya gazeta* on 16 March 1977, he said:

“Now, after the passage of time, I would hardly have written those scenes in *Live and Remember* where Guskov behaves like a wild beast, howling like a wolf, or the scene where he brutally kills the calf. This approach is too superficial and simplifies things too much, it makes the deserter seem cruder than he is in fact. Neither am I particularly pleased with the style. I surely could have done a better job of writing.”

But certainly there must be joy for Rasputin in the very process of writing: the joy of creating, of struggling with the written word, with himself, and his purely human weaknesses and passions.

“Someone was selling a bearskin.” The story, “A Bearskin for Sale”, in which this phrase appears as a traditional framework, carrying out a certain emotional and explanatory function as well, has been included by Rasputin in several collections of his works. In the earlier editions, this phrase, repeated twice, concludes the piece as well, as an insistent, direct appeal to the reader. The necessity of this is justified if one considers that it is appended to a laconic, quite ordinary text: a tourist walked into a shop to have a look at a bearskin. “There’s some kind of a spot on it...” he remarked with a frown of displeasure. Another ambled over and exclaimed: “And there’s a hole in it, too...”

In this manner, the reader is already warned not to be superficial like these tourists but instead to rest his gaze on the dirty, moth-eaten skin, for the story behind it is not at all ordinary... Intriguing the reader in this guileless fashion, or more precisely, almost beseeching him to read further, Rasputin begins his tale, which is in fact quite extraordinary—almost demonic—of a bear tracking a hunter.

The exotic beauty and harsh reality of Sayany, a mountainous region in southeastern Siberia, and the difficult and uniquely poetic lives of the Tofalars, the hearty folk who dwell there, are the subject of an entire book by Rasputin, *The Land Near the Edge of the Earth*. It is easy to understand how a young journalist could be so taken with these people and their unusual land, how he could rush to record on paper his impressions in a series of mundane sketches in which an unoriginal style and manner are accompanied by shallow, derivative philosophical conclusions.

It also would hardly be justifiable to judge by today's standards "Rudolfio", a short story from this collection, the very title of which gives rise to accusations of pretentiousness.

In Rasputin's early stories, simplicity, proportionality, and contrived conflicts exist alongside melodrama and naive philosophising. In place of Rasputin's customary analysis of the main character's inner world, we find here superficial affectations, and in place of genuine emotions, only their appellations. The writer's lack of experience is obvious throughout these pieces. He is clearly still searching for an effective means of expression all his own.

Rasputin's early stories gave no clue as yet of what was to come in such mature works as *Live and Remember* and *Borrowed Time* with their highly original language and style and profound psychologism.

Perhaps the only one of his stories written before his major novellas which gives any hint of what lies in store for the reader is "Vasily and Vasilissa". But if we take a strictly utilitarian approach—in length, "Vasily and Vasilissa" is also a novella—then can we not conclude that longer pieces written on a broader

scale are closer to Rasputin's heart and more to his liking than essays and short stories?

This conclusion was drawn in fact by critics and readers alike, and Rasputin was dubbed a master of "long prose". But the writer surprised everyone in the eighties by printing a series of excellent and quite unexpected short stories. Rasputin has adopted a technique more in character as his talent evolved and developed: he examines the minutest changes in the inner world of a person under the most quotidian of circumstances. It was precisely their masterful psychological analyses which played the decisive role in bringing international fame to Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, for example.

Rasputin's novella *Borrowed Time* seems to sum up all the author's basic convictions which were presented in previous works. Apparently he did not consider them to have been dealt with in sufficient depth before, so he attempted to find a more striking way of driving his message home. Anything which might distract the reader's attention from these main points is mercilessly excluded. Therefore, it seems appropriate to begin our analysis precisely with this novella, especially since this was the first work in which the prosaist's considerable talent found full and adequate expression.

The central image of *Borrowed Time* had been ripening gradually over the years in Rasputin's writing. It is quite justifiable to claim that the image of the old woman Anna was being developed and elaborated upon from his very first stories. The features of this character are alluded to in the sorrowful image of a mother who had "given birth... fourteen times" but "only two remained alive" in the early story "Ten Graves in the Taiga", which cannot really stand alone.

The details of the old woman's portrait were selected with care: their appropriateness and exactness were tried out in a long series of sketches. Brush strokes of the future image can be found in details presented earlier and even embodied in phrases which are woven into the fabric of the novella almost without alteration: "The old woman was not afraid of death, for she knew that it was inevitable. She had fulfilled her obligation to humanity... She had been fruitful and multiplied, so her line would continue. She was a dependable link in a chain—a link to which other links were forged... That night, the old woman died." ("The Old Woman").

The contours of the future portrait of old Anna are evident in the kindly, long-suffering Vasilissa who has worked hard all her life ("Vasily and Vasilissa"). We also get a glimpse of Anna in the lively Russian peasant woman Aunt Natalia (*Money for Maria*) who has long made her peace with the Grim Reaper and speaks of death as calmly and dispassionately as she would of her next-door neighbor: "I've given in already," she said and everyone understood that she was speaking of death.

~ The long and thorny path to *Borrowed Time* with all the vacillations and self-searching that accompanied it only confirms the importance of this work within the context of Rasputin's fate as a writer.

...Old Anna had done right by humanity: she had reared her children as well as she could, and that was no easy matter, for she had gotten them through the terrible years of World War II, helping them endure illness and hunger. She had lamented and cried bitter tears over those who were not destined to live: of thirteen, only five remained. But looking day by day and year after year at the specter of death which had

followed her throughout life, still, she was able to weigh the joys and sufferings and say that her life was "kind, obedient, and lucky. Luckier than anyone else's. Why should she complain that she had given it all to her children when that was why she had come into the world: so it would never languish without people or grow old without children."

Old Anna had lived out her long life and faced death with a light heart. For she had "thought about it many times ... and knew it as well as she did herself." "No, she was not afraid of dying. There was a time and place for everything. She had lived long and seen enough of life. All her inner resources were spent: she was empty. She had lived life to the fullest, and was drained to the last drop." Later, explaining the appearance and development of this persistent image of the old peasant woman in his works, Rasputin made the following comment: "I never cease to be amazed by the utterly calm attitude of old women to death, which they accept as something perfectly natural. I think they have gained this serenity from the vast experience of a long life..."¹

Old Anna, like her literary predecessors and all old village women, had devoted her whole life to her children and selflessly spent all her energy on them. And finally, when she was unable even to rise from her bed, she worried more than anything that she had become a burden to her son Mikhail and his family. She recalled a time from the distant years of her girlhood when everything around her was young, vivid, and beautiful, and she regretted for an instant that this beauty would remain long after she was gone,

¹V. Rasputin, "Be Yourself", *Voprosy literatury*, No. 9, 1976.

and that it was not for her any longer. But she reproached herself at once, saying: "You should be ashamed. A fine thing it would be if everything on earth were to grow old and die along with you just because that was what you wanted."

These reflections on Anna's part at the end of her long life are not the code of some do-gooder: they are the mark of a strong character forged by nature, formed by folk traditions and ethical notions and ethics in which good and bad are clearly defined. There is nothing edifying in the mother's final words to her children. Neither is any tiresome didacticism present in the phraseology and tones Rasputin uses to paint his portrait of old Anna.

But all the same, why an old woman? Why should a young writer who could tell us so much of his contemporaries suddenly come up with a tale about an eighty-year-old woman? Clearly, he knew more about people of his own generation, for their aspirations were similar to his own and their everyday lives were more familiar to him. Fyodor Abramov provided one of the most accurate answers to this question at a writer's conference: "The image of elderly people and the older generation in our literature and subsequent profound generalizations are an attempt to think through and grasp their life experience and the moral strength which saved Russia during the most difficult years of trial and suffering in our country's long and eventful history."¹

From 1941 to 1945, millions of Soviet women became widows, and millions of children were orphaned. The tremendous burden of reconstructing the heavily damaged economy fell on the shoulders

¹*Literaturnaya gazeta*, 30 June 1976.

of rural women, who not only tilled the fields, looked after the livestock, and built houses and farmsteads, but became the heads of collective farms, chief administrators, holders of important leadership posts within the Party.

When the cities needed workers, these rural widows, having no real way of helping their children get on their feet, sent them to work in factories and mines and at construction sites. The village came to the city... Then, later on, when these village kids were given the opportunity to study at technical schools and institutes, these very same widows gave them their last crusts of bread and took second jobs so their children would be able "to get an education". The country needed millions of specialists and highly qualified workers, for the industrialization of the economy was proceeding at an unprecedented rate. So the villages sent their young people to the city once more...

The factories that were put back into operation and the new ones that were being built repaid the villages with technology that required trained specialists. So now the city went to the village to improve agriculture. The Russian village grew in size and prosperity, and its need for contact with the outside world increased. It needed specialists of a new type, so the city came to its aid—and some of these specialists were former village kids who had gone to the country's urban centers for advanced training. Now they could return home...

The gigantic scale of the construction going on in Siberia literally altered the economic and political geography of the region, moving whole districts from their old locations, turning sleepy villages into thriving settlements, and building cities in previously unin-

habited taiga. It was incredible indeed. People arrived from all over the Soviet Union to lend a hand in this great undertaking—mostly young men and women—and if we take into account their youth and the large number of nationalities and vastly differing cultures they represented, it is easy to imagine the morass of problems which suddenly appeared and mushroomed overnight. The effect these changes had on Siberia is mind-boggling.

This massive migration which continued over the course of many years created a fundamentally new type of village inhabited by a new kind of people with characters very different than those of the peasants and trappers of old. It is no exaggeration to state that this migration brought about a real revolution in the history of Siberia—the beginning of a new era. The old customs, relations between people, and a way of life which had emerged over the course of centuries were rapidly vanishing from the face of the earth. The young writer Rasputin, a witness to these great changes in his native region, set himself the noble task of preserving these old ways, this vanishing world, for literature. After all, the great Russian poet Pushkin said: “Respect for the past is the feature which distinguishes the civilized man from the barbarian.”

All of Rasputin's novellas deal with precisely this complex period in the recent history of Siberia, for he himself is a product of those turbulent times. It goes without saying that literature and history have quite different functions and employ diverse methods. Moreover, they have dissimilar relationships to the objective and the subjective. The fiction writer does not simply record and evaluate events which have occurred. Neither does he necessarily attempt to present all the social, economic, geographic, and demo-

graphic changes which take place in every single layer of society. The stratum of society Rasputin deals with is the native Siberians—the people born and bred of that land. The object of his search is the moral experience of centuries and its interaction with the new—the losses and gains which have come about as a result of that inevitable collision.

The rich life experience and harsh trials which the older generation trod formed a particular type of character in many instances. Today's grandparents are a living incarnation, a graphic illustration of folk traditions. They are the bearers of moral health in the stormy, very extreme conditions of our age which is so full of philosophical and spiritual quests. This century is characterized by increasing contacts between countries and continents and (alas!) by decreasing contacts between neighbors and even relatives.

In light of this, it is difficult to overestimate the significance of such works as *Borrowed Time*. The novel is effective due to the author's skilled presentation and the undisputably convincing characters, who serve as practical examples to improve anyone's moral qualities in everyday life. Accustomed to sharing misfortune and success with their neighbors, "with the world", as it were, experience has convinced the heroes of *Borrowed Time* of the value of helping one another and living as good neighbors.

The central theme of the novellas *Borrowed Time* and *Money for Maria* is interpersonal relations. The author has set himself the task of testing the firmness of the ties between people who have lived side by side all their lives and who consider themselves good neighbors in general. These ties are tested when misfortune befalls one of them, but nonetheless, the misfortune is not their own.

The money Kuzma is attempting to collect on behalf of his wife, who finds herself in a serious trouble when a large sum goes missing from the village store where she works as a sales clerk (*Money for Maria*) is merely an artifice employed by the writer to examine the problems that interest him. But still, this money is important, for the honor and fate of a person depends on whether or not the necessary sum is collected. However, the main point of the novella is the confirmation of the solemnity and seriousness of spiritual contacts between people, the inviolability of ties born of common labor and concerns, and of an everyday existence shared by one and all. Even the strongest of ties can weaken and break if people lose their common aim and have divergent spiritual values which disrupt their unity.

Rasputin's mastery at painting convincing portraits of women is enviable, indeed. Both amazing and worthy of the deepest respect is the pure and filial love with which he writes of Vasilissa ("Vasily and Vasilissa"), Maria (*Money for Maria*), old Anna (*Borrowed Time*), and finally, Daria in *Farewell to Matyora*. Sometimes it seems that women are the motive force behind all Rasputin's works, while men play only secondary roles.

The author's opinion on this subject is of no mean interest:

"A great deal depends on a person's relations to his surroundings. Alienation is the most dangerous possibility for the human character in certain circumstances. How frequently it happens, alas, that one person has no desire to listen to what another has to say...

"Women are amazingly sensitive to the misfortunes of others...

"In Siberian villages, I am constantly meeting women with extremely strong characters. All their fellow-villagers know them and go to them for advice, comfort, and support..."¹

All of Rasputin's heroines actually do have strong, well-integrated natures. Even Maria, who is confused and depressed by her terrible misfortune (*Money for Maria*), and Nastyona, who cannot bear up under the dreadful knowledge that her husband is a traitor and deserter (*Live and Remember*) are unique, strong individuals. It is certainly correct to assert that all these women represent a single image, a type of character which developed due to particular historical circumstances. These women represent an entire epoch in Soviet literature.

Kuzma (*Money for Maria*) has a brother who lives in the city, and he has done well enough for himself financially. But for some reason, Kuzma goes to him last of all—only when it is absolutely necessary. For a long time, there have been no ties between the two brothers—neither the land nor their work. Their ideals, which were once about the same, have long since diverged. That difference in moral potential which nourished them both from birth and was barely noticeable when they were youngsters together, has become a vast abyss. Blood ties, it turns out, are not always the decisive factor in human relationships. In his play *Elder Son*, Rasputin's friend Vampilov asserted that spiritual ties and common moral principles are much more lofty and are always stronger than mere blood ties.

The strength of this spiritual kinship is demonstrated by Kuzma's fellow-villagers in the novella: the

¹ *Voprosy literatury*, No 9, 1976, p. 147.

eccentric, disinterested old man Gordei who has tried all his long life to escape the corrupting influence of money; the caring, scrupulously fair collective farm chairman, who is wholeheartedly dedicated to the service of others; forward and honest Vasily, Kuzma's neighbor who could never reconcile himself to any kind of baseness. The same spiritual closeness was what enabled the old couple who were chance fellow-travellers of Kuzma on the train to live many decades together in love and harmony.

We see the family in *Borrowed Time* on the verge of final separation and total alienation. Actually, at the moment we come into contact with Anna's family, it has practically disintegrated. Of all the many children old Anna bore in her time, the only one who comes to visit is her eldest daughter, Varvara, "when-ever she needs potatoes or something like that"; the rest behave as if "she were no longer in the land of the living". They gather only at their mother's death-bed; and even then, not all the children come. The fact that this family has long ceased to exist as a spiritual entity is evident, for the only topic of their conversation when they meet is childhood memories; the brothers' vain endeavors to reestablish contact via liquor and each sister's accusations of insensitivity on the part of the other are an attempt to assuage guilty consciences. The family's only binding force is their mother. But old Anna is dying, and the siblings will probably never have cause to gather all together again. Only Varvara, burdened by the constant cares of raising a large family, will perhaps come to visit her brother in the village "to borrow some potatoes".

Even more terrifying is the fact that the children have gathered at their mother's bedside not from love

or even from the natural desire to see her off on her final journey, but from a sense of obligation and fear of what others might say if they failed to appear as was required by the unwritten laws of proper behavior. There was always the possibility that their failure to appear would be misunderstood or that they would be condemned by others as they themselves now condemn Tanchora, Anna's favorite daughter, who never appears at her mother's death-bed. "...Each of them felt a new sense of bitter satisfaction at the fact that they were at their mother's side in her final hour, as befitted a good son or daughter. The very fact of their presence seemed sufficient to them to warrant her forgiveness—a special kind of forgiveness that had very little to do with their mother but which was nevertheless vital to their lives in general."

We are convinced of the fact that the children's arrival was mere adherence to "the letter of the law" and the dictates of "decency". They themselves feel the impropriety of their hasty departure when their mother "takes her time and is slow about dying". So they hide behind artificially animated conversations about how their mother will get well, promising to come again soon for another visit. Only Anna's little granddaughter Nina, with the directness of childhood, comments on their untimely departure: "They're bad people."

Left alone with her thoughts, one of the daughters, Liusia, tries to examine her relations with her family openly and honestly. "...She felt no particular kinship with them, no blood ties, yet in her mind she knew that such a bond existed. That increased her feeling of irritation at herself ... and at them, and even at her mother, for whose sake she had made this long journey to no purpose whatsoever. She was irritated most

of all that her trip had been in vain..."

Who are they, these people, united by blood alone and divided by invisible walls of indifference? Who are these brothers and sisters whom their mother so loves and suddenly thinks of as strangers?

The episode of Liusia's walk in the forest is worked masterfully into the novella and betrays great subtlety of psychological insight. Images from the past materialize here and become almost tangible, attaining a rare degree of plasticity and voluminousness. That walk in the past puts one in such a state that a melancholy, slightly alarming, romantic melody seems to be playing in one's head all the while.

Liusia knows the forest well. She recognizes almost every tree, although a lot has changed and the fields where she worked during the hungry war years have grown over. Liusia tries in vain to comfort herself: "It has nothing to do with me. I left long before any of these changes, after all..." But these very attempts to soothe her conscience betray her guilt. She abandoned that forest and her native village long ago, rejecting even the memory of them, forgetting her roots in the process. "Forgotten... There it was in the end, that which had not been cut off and had, almost from the very beginning of the day, tormented her with some dormant guilt for which she would now have to answer." This thought recurs throughout the novel. But another notion exists parallel to it: the fact that Liusia has "forgotten" means she has lost not only the forest, but herself in the first place. She has grown poorer spiritually, becoming somehow alien to what was once her home. "How strange and how remote it all was, as if none of it had happened to her."

This "forgetting" becomes a double-edged sword. Kuzma thinks of his brother (*Money for Maria*): "The

process seemed mutual: his brother had gradually forgotten the village, and his childhood as well. And in its turn, the village had slowly forgotten that such a person had ever lived there."

The old woman on the train tells Kuzma that, "...everyone is from the village. The only difference is that some people left it a bit earlier, and others, a bit later. Some understand that, and others don't."

Liusia in *Borrowed Time* is callous, tactless, and insincere; she thinks she has the right to boss others around, since it is her opinion that her long tenure in the city has ennobled her, revealing to her ethical and esthetic norms which are inaccessible to the "villagers". In the city, however, she is prepared to brag to her girlfriends that "once upon a time", she also did her share of farm work.

Mikhail lives with his mother (or his mother lives with him) and therefore, he avoids many of the unpleasant situations in which his brother and sisters find themselves. Would he have visited his mother if he lived in the city? Would he have left along with the rest without waiting for the old woman's death, or would he have remained? Clearly, he is in a better position than the others, because he is accustomed to being with his mother, and she with him. Therefore, the relations between the two are simple and unconstrained. Yes, he was the one who sent the telegrams, summoning them all to the bedside of their dying mother, but would not his elder brother Ilia have done the same if he had been the one living with her? Neither does the author make Mikhail blameless, his "jokes", his drunken escapades, and the frequent lack of even the most elementary attention hurt his ailing mother deeply. Anna herself "did not consider Mikhail any better than her other children. She

had simply been fated to live with him and wait for the others to come visit her every summer. And wait the old woman did. She waited and waited... She was accustomed to being around him and tolerated all his moods. All the changes that took place within him went unnoticed in her eyes. To her he was the same today as he was yesterday. Ilia was a different matter..."

There's no doubt that Mikhail comes out ahead in comparison to the dull-witted Ilia and the bovine, long-suffering Varvara who hasn't much of a head on her shoulders. But do we have the right to demand of the author that all the characters be just alike? Moreover, stupidity is not a moral category. And finally, there is about as much reason to consider Ilia and Varvara city-dwellers as there is to call Mikhail one. After all, Ilia is a driver in what is obviously a small town not far away. All his habits and his village nature seem to stress the unresolved situation in which he finds himself. Varvara lives in the regional center—a rather large village—where people keep chickens and cows.

When Mikhail's first child, a son, is born, "he was almost drunk with amazement at the fact that he was practically a boy himself but had become a father and had taken part for the first time in the continuation of the human race. He said:

"Look, Mother: I came from you, and now he has come from me. One day, someone will come from him, too.' Then he added with the mysterious bitterness of a prophet: 'That's the way things go.'"

That's the way things go, indeed. But his mother had known that for a long time. There had been only one concern in all of Anna's long life, and that was to raise her children, to forge a new link in the chain of

life. It is very important to understand this: except for her children, she has nothing at all. "It never occurred to them," writes critic Igor Dedkov in a review of *Borrowed Time*, "that their mother was already one foot in the grave, and that she remained alive beyond her time only out of the love and pain she felt for her children."¹

The only solace that fell the old woman's lot before her end was that she got to see her children. How she is tormented by the thought that she has not "lived up to their expectations", that she has "failed them" by not dying soon after their arrival! How must they harden their hearts to reply to her apologies and pleas as they do: Liusia with irritation, and Ilia with buffoonery.

At the culmination of their inter-familial relations, the unspoken etiquette observed by all of them breaks down. Finally, tormented by the long wait, forced inactivity, and boredom, as well as by the lack of any common topics of conversation, the "children" put aside all reservations and euphemisms and speak openly. Mikhail is tired of the transparent hints and thinly camouflaged barbs his sisters keep throwing at him, especially Liusia. Moreover, his self-control has been weakened considerably by excessive drinking. In a word Mikhail explodes.

He understands full-well the hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness of his sisters' denunciatory retorts. And so he takes Liusia at her word when she, criticizing him for his neglect of their mother, says: "If he doesn't want you to live with him, it's O. K. We'll make arrangements." Suddenly, Mikhail explodes: "You're the most fair of us all, and you're the one who knows

¹*Druzhba narodov*, No. 3, 1971.

everything. You know how to look after her. So you can change her sheets and give her lectures. Hurry up and take her home with you before someone beats you to it! Why are you just standing there!"

This is a provocation, of course, but Mikhail is forced into it. He stoops to it in a fit of emotion. But the next day, he suffers because of this argument and feels he was the only guilty party.

Liusia, the most "intellectual" and "just" of them all, feels no pricks of conscience whatsoever. The opposite, in fact: she is in complete agreement with Mikhail that he is the only guilty party, and that there is no reason for her to go and apologize to him. With her former enthusiasm, she continues to lecture him on how his little daughter Nina should be raised and about how he should take care of his mother as well. Liusia doesn't even notice the bitter and terrible truth that her brother's words about "changing sheets" were intended for her. After all, she was the one who, as soon as she arrived, raised a fuss that the sheets on her mother's bed were not quite fresh. She ~~did~~ not hold it against Mikhail so much as against his wife, Nadia, whose job it was to attend to such things, after all. And once again, she failed to notice how uncomfortable and ashamed everyone felt after this conversation. They were ashamed for her! And her mother, an illiterate woman who had lived all her life in a remote village, was forced to give her daughter a lesson in "good manners": "You shouldn't have said anything to her, Liusia. She's not to blame, after all. She's come to me lots of times and asked me to let her change the sheets. But I just didn't feel like moving. I don't feel like moving at all, and I'm afraid to." "But I didn't say a word to her." "Maybe not to

her, but what's the difference? She's the one who takes care of me, not Mikhail. "

What was the reaction of the story's heroes to Mikhail's outburst? Sober-minded, judgemental, callous Liusia can only shout: "You've gone out of your mind!" Varvara, to whom Mikhail offers the cow as well as his mother, answers guilelessly, completely in character: "We've got no room as it is..." "So you've got no room for her," Mikhail presses her. "Then that means you've got no room for the cow either." "No, we can put the cow in the shed." Only Ilia refuses to be baited, intuitively and precisely locating the weak point in his brother's position: "You've had too much to drink, Mikhail. You don't know what you're saying."

Summing up this mad inquisition, Mikhail draws the only conclusion he can, though it is a rather harsh one: "You just lie there and sleep, Mother. Right where you are. They love you more that way, when you're here with me. You've got to understand that."

That explosion taken out of context, or placed, say, at the beginning of the novella, would seem monstrous or senseless. The author prepares the ground for it step by step. He gets us ready for this conflict by imperceptibly increasing the level of psychological tension in the situation and by revealing the characters of the personages in a strictly logical fashion.

Old Anna understands that it would have been better if she had not seen or heard that divisiveness between her own children: "Oh Lord, take me away from here. Let death come. I am ready." There is nothing more she can do on this earth.

We shall return once more to the "children"—to old Anna's sons and daughters who are already

parents themselves (Varvara, moreover, is already a grandmother). We shall have one more look to make sure we understand them fully before we begin to judge them. And we must make sure our perception of them coincides with the author's attitude toward his characters.

How does Varvara, the first to arrive in response to Mikhail's telegram, appear to us? She has barely opened the gate and has not yet caught sight of anyone in the yard when she begins to wail and continues her lamentation inside the house, despite the admonitions of her brother, even after seeing that her mother is still alive. We do not have the right—and the author gives us no reason—to doubt the sincerity of Varvara's daughterly feelings. But observe the way she “turns herself on” and “moves away to cry at the table where it is more comfortable”! When she realizes she cannot compete with the wailing of Mikhail's daughter, Nina, she submissively falls silent. This seems to be a clear-cut case of carrying out customs and traditions, of fulfilling obligations. The reaction of the other characters to her loud lamenting confirms our suspicions: except for Mikhail, who asks her to stop, and little Nina, who is frightened by her aunt's unusual behavior, no one pays any attention to Varvara. She, as the eldest, knows the most about folk traditions, but due to her dull-wittedness and excessive zeal, she has set about “fulfilling her obligations” sooner than she should have. And this stereotyped behavior implanted on a living personality, this matter of habit and obligation walking hand in hand with impulse, mingling with and discrediting it, immediately give us the key to the heroine's character. We are already prepared to penetrate further into the depths of Varvara's inner world.

To be perfectly frank, there is nothing particularly deep about her personality. Varvara is a meek person.

The only way in which she resembled her mother was that she bore many children. Terribly hassled by her large family, Varvara, unlike Anna, was never able to become a real mistress of the house and mentor for her children. Instead, she grew accustomed to whining constantly about how hard life was. She was old before her time, "fat and cumbersome".

We observe this woman with sympathy and a grim smile. For even in her good-hearted and sincere concern for her mother, she is unable to show the good sides of her character.

Ilia, unlike Varvara, grew up in a manner not entirely comprehensible to his mother. "There was never any telling what he might be up to." At times, it seemed he had a few screws loose: when left to guard the cartloads of grain, he chased the chickens away with a shotgun. On one occasion, however, he demonstrated a bit of highly unusual and fairly malicious quick-wittedness: to keep a visiting commission from checking the quality of the ploughing, Ilia stripped and ploughed the field absolutely naked. Since there were women on the commission, they departed hastily without examining a thing.

Ilia was called up towards the end of the war, but he never got to do any actual fighting: while his unit was still in training, the war ended.

And now, before her death, stealthily examining her grown children, Anna realizes that Ilia remains a total mystery to her. Most people are altered by experience, knowledge, and maturity, both spiritual and moral. However, in Ilia's case, none of this has happened.

Though he has said good-bye to the village, Ilia has

not become a city person, and the old woman guesses that "it hasn't been any better for him there than it was here."

Childish naivety, enthusiasm, and openness gave way in Ilia the adult to infantility and doltishness. Ilia's buffoonery borders on cruelty, after all. The fact that this cruelty is involuntary and even smothered in good intentions does not make it any easier for those around him to bear.

In comparison to her brothers and sisters, Liusia seems to have the most complex nature and to be the most intellectually developed. We have already seen what subtle feelings a simple walk in the forest awake in her. And she also knows what is good and what is bad... Moreover, she speaks grammatical, proper Russian. And despite the fact that she is already past forty, Liusia looks younger; she dresses not like the others, but fashionably and with good taste, "a real townswoman all over".

Of course, it is easier for her to look after herself if for no other reason than "God didn't give her ... any children." But according to normally accepted ways of thinking, this is a misfortune, not a blessing. It might seem that childlessness should evoke a heightened love for children in this woman, especially for her niece. However, we see more irritation and moralizing than attachment in Liusia's attitude toward little Nina. The girl senses this and rewards her aunt with overt hostility.

By the way, this detail, this character flaw, no matter what its reason, seems to have very little relationship to the moral profile of the heroine. Let us be optimists and approach this profile with a positive attitude in an attempt to learn as much as we can about Liusia. For there are features which do not

generally strike the eye: rather they are hidden in the most secret corners of the soul.

Liusia's neatness in dress is not affected or for the benefit of others; it is simply an old habit. A very likeable and feminine habit which is intuitive and somewhat automatic. "...Her mood and even the way her affairs went that day depended on the way she was dressed. Liusia believed firmly that troubles also had eyes. Before choosing a victim, they would examine a person's appearance and would rarely single out a strong, successful-looking individual." It follows that a note of superstition, suspicion, and calculated behavior are seen here. If Liusia "didn't have the appropriate garb, she wouldn't go anywhere".

Here, a new "theme" begins: "...When she heard the voice of the returning Varvara outside, she imagined how her sister would drag around after her all day whining and driving her crazy." There's no question about it: to tolerate Varvara's whining takes a lot of patience and energy. But we should recall that the sisters haven't seen each other for many years, and it would seem that Liusia could make such a small sacrifice and see Varvara. But the main point here is that it's not just Varvara she doesn't want to see. "She had absolutely no desire to stay at the house, and she didn't want to see anyone at all or talk with anyone. She had no desire to pity a single soul or to give sympathy or encouragement."

One thing is obvious: Liusia is totally alienated from all her kin—from her roots, as it were—and this is her own doing.

Everything Liusia does is intentional: she thinks about it in advance. Her cruelty is conscious: she has come for nothing—after all, her mother has not died. Her mother is even guilty of not dying. If she had died

on time, her daughter would not have been forced to tolerate all these uncultured relations who were constantly pestering her with their problems.

Liusia's pettiness manifests itself in the fact that she envies her absent sister Tanchora, for whom her dying mother pines and whom she loves more than Liusia. This pettiness, hardness of heart, and possibly, soullessness—the basic feature of Liusia's character—result in the state Nina puts her finger on so accurately: "You're afraid of her yourself," she tells her grandmother. She could well have told her parents, and her aunt and uncle as well, "You're all afraid of her yourselves." They might have told the child, "We're all afraid of her." But Nina is not yet bound by the necessity of loving. For them to be open would not violate century-old traditions so much as their own inner standards. They do love Liusia in their own ways. They fear her, fail to understand her, and are often surprised by her actions, but they do not envy her—which is what she is counting on, of course. They probably pity Liusia more than anything. But love her, they do...

Mikhail blows up only once during the entire course of the novella, and then only because he has more than sufficient reason for doing so. He is the youngest in the family (not counting the absent Tanchora). It would be stretching the point to suggest that Mikhail, who was born after the war, a product of the present day who is surrounded by modern machinery at work, has preserved more of the patriarchal character than his brother and sisters. None of the subservience and submission typical of patriarchalism is present, of course, but morally, at least, we cannot accuse Mikhail of failing to respect some elementary sort of hierarchy.

Of all old Anna's children, the thing about Mikhail which attracts us most of all is his organic need to think, compare, and analyse. Perhaps this is a bit of an overstatement when applied to a simple village boy. But Mikhail is hardly simple or ordinary in that sense.

Varvara, Ilia, and even Liusia take life as a given without trying to understand the stages by which it proceeds or the interdependence of man and nature, of eternity and the given moment.

For Mikhail, every fairly important event is a subject first and foremost for reflection and comparison. When his son is born, the young father ponders the rationality of nature in providing an unbroken chain that stretches to infinity. An ordinary participant in the process of radical changes taking place in his native village and even the agent that carries it out, he contrasts past and present, taking account of the gains and losses. For the first time in his conscious life, Mikhail has run up against something terrifying and incomprehensible which, at the same time, is normal and even unavoidable—the death of someone close to him. He examines from all angles this monstrous but highly regular event and his helplessness in the face of it. Of course, these reflections and analyses are in keeping with the level of his knowledge and the limited life experience he has thus far amassed. But that doesn't depend on him, and we must accept it as such. The main thing is that he is not passive and that his active stance is not grasping or egoistical but abstractly philosophical to be sure, and therefore, not connected in any way with concrete gain. His conclusions are not always amateurish, those of a dilettante. Is it not worthy of attention that Mikhail considers his mother's demise as placing an obligation upon them, the children, to carry out her functions

here on earth and to preserve and utilize the experience she has gained over a long lifetime in the defense of others? Up till then, old Anna had stood between them and eternity. But from now on, Mikhail, her son, would have to take that burden on his shoulders. In the future, his daughter Nina would look upon him as something stable, something which had been sent by nature to defend and preserve her. He would have to explain everything to her, to reveal all the world's secrets...

Mikhail's reflections and habit of analyzing everything cause him problems and even lead to an argument, although he does everything he can to avoid it. He realizes the reason for his sisters' displeasure from the very start. He says to Ilia: "You're wondering why they're mad at me? Because they're angry: after all, I'm the one who sent the telegrams that brought them all here. And then Mother didn't die. It's as if I had called them all here for no purpose, as if I had lied to them." It gets even worse for him when the new accusations start. His "white lie" leads to the same results: seeing how his mother is suffering from the absence of her youngest daughter, Mikhail tells her that he sent Tanchora a telegram saying their mother was better, and not to come. This points to some of Mikhail's better features: his sensitivity and readiness to make sacrifices. These characteristics he inherited from old Anna, and they appear so uncompromisingly now perhaps because he has already traded places with his mother. It is already he and not his mother who is the protector and defender.

Conscientiousness and humaneness are the keystones of Mikhail's moral profile. These features seem to add the final touches to his portrait, and to the novella in general. So Rasputin emphasizes them, but

with subtle reserve as always. Having lost hope entirely and reconciled himself to the departure of Ilia and his sisters, Mikhail stops trying to convince them, to appeal to their sense of honor and responsibility, to their filial and daughterly emotions. "You could wait a bit longer," he remarked timidly, and that was all. These words contain an enormous reflective and emotional weight despite their brevity.

Addressing his mother as he sees off his departing siblings, he says: "Don't worry, Mother. Everything will be fine. We got along alright before, and we'll do just fine now. Don't be too angry with me, I'm a total idiot. What a fool I am," he groaned and rose. "Lie still, Mother. Lie still, and don't worry about anything. And try not to be too angry at me..." With these words, he is asking old Anna's forgiveness for all of them. He is fulfilling their responsibility.

He is protecting them. The moral torch has been passed from one generation to the next.

Andrei Guskov in the novella *Live and Remember*, joined the army in 1941, almost as soon as the war started, and he fought until 1944, when the end of the war was already in sight. He didn't behave terribly courageously in battle; he fought honestly, fundamentally like a peasant, without playing it safe unnecessarily. He fought like everyone else—no better no worse. So it is not surprising that Guskov was considered a dependable comrade among the reconnaissance men. And this dependable comrade, with whom anyone would be willing to go on a reconnaissance mission, suddenly became a deserter when the end of the war and sure victory were in the offing...

Of course, "suddenly" is not the most accurate word here. Although a victorious denouement was

almost a reality, for Andrei Guskov, who had spent three exhausting years in the trenches, each day might be his last. So he started thinking about the fact that he might get killed now, right before the final curtain, when he was practically home free. It was a terrible thought; it would have been horribly unjust. But would the bullet made with the single intention of killing stop to ask about the justice of it all? What did it matter that he had fought almost since the very first day of the war, and so far, all the bullets had missed him? Did he have some sort of advantage over the youths who had taken their places beside him in the trenches only that day? From a purely human point of view, is not such a mood completely comprehensible? After all, in *Before Sunrise*, a story by Vasil Bykov, a writer of the older generation and former front-line soldier, we find a man who has fought the war almost to the end and turns coward literally on the eve of the victory.

In moments of especially unbearable boredom, Guskov succumbs to his terror and imagines how fine it would be if he were wounded—"not badly, of course; nothing serious—just enough to win some time". And he really does get wounded, but it happened without any intention on his part, and his wound was far from light. He was unconscious for over twenty-four hours, and then he spent three months in a Novosibirsk hospital.

"The war is over for me," decided Guskov. He and the other men in his ward all knew that even if the doctors managed to get him back in shape, he was still entitled to a furlough after such a wound. He wouldn't even let his wife come to visit him, since he was counting on getting a home-leave after he got well... But there it was—he was being sent back to his

unit without a chance to go home! "He had prepared himself entirely for the long-awaited meeting with his family—with his father, his mother, and Nastyona—down to the last thought, down to the last drop. That was the idea he lived with, gotten well with, and breathed. The thought of home was the only thing he knew. If he didn't see his family now, he wouldn't make it any longer. He would be killed in his very next battle." By Siberian standards, his home was practically right next door—he was almost there.

Needless to say, he could have ignored these forebodings as superstitions in peacetime, when the routines of everyday life give order to existence and make things easy as pie. But Guskov finds himself in extraordinary circumstances, for in war, death is a commonplace event.

All the same, that Andrei Guskov became a deserter was quite an unexpected turn of events. In any case, it was not planned in advance. Now, with the perspective given by hindsight, it is easy to pick out and interpret some event or other in the life of Guskov, and in light of that, to show that he was destined to become a deserter. Several critics have done just that. They see the roots of his betrayal in the way he says farewell to the place where he spent his childhood, setting off for the front with the first recruits. ("Andrei looked at the village in silent offense, as if he were prepared to blame not the war but the village itself for the fact that he had to leave.") They note that he is especially reserved compared with the others who are departing. However, these critics fail to notice other, even more important episodes in this parting: for example, that he is more courageous than the rest, telling his family good-bye at home to spare them unnecessary grief. ("Whatever you have to leave,

you should leave at once.”) Neither do they take note of the “promise he made then”: “to end his life without grasping at hopes that won’t hold firm”. This promise really is very important. Consider this: Guskov is not planning to remain alive. He has no such hopes. The hope of surviving the war appears much later for him, along with the certainty of imminent victory...

It is then that his secret dreams of a minor wound appear... And to be sure, they are used by some critics as the most conclusive evidence that the desertion was planned long beforehand by Guskov. For some reason, they do not take into account that Guskov is dreaming of a minor wound, which would give him a temporary break from the army but not free him altogether. He does not put himself in the bullet’s path but is wounded honestly in a battle where he conducted himself bravely. That wound could well have been the end for him. Finally, we do not have the right to ignore the announcement Guskov makes the moment all his hopes of a furlough are dashed: “He only wanted to go home for a single day, and ~~that~~ that would be enough to calm his spirit. Then he would be prepared to face anything.”

There is another rather important factor here. All these past events and emotions are being recalled today by Guskov himself, who applies them to his own situation in various ways in an attempt to find an answer to the eternal, sacramental question: how did it all begin?

Affected and wholeheartedly offended by the “unjust” decision of the doctors, he got on a train headed away from the front, planning to spend a day or two at home. Surely he, a veteran who had spent the entire war in the trenches, could be forgiven a day

of absence without leave. But it took three whole days for the train to get as far as Irkutsk. And in the winter, it took a couple more days to get all the way to his village. Every day inexorably increased the distance between him and his comrades in the trenches, and the vision of the court martial which awaited him upon his return appeared ever more clearly before his eyes. Even more terrible was the thought of the disdain and hatred of his fellow soldiers. Every day, he found himself a step closer to the point of no return.

An exemplary worker and fine soldier... How quickly Andrei Guskov loses those qualities which gave him the right to consider himself a loyal citizen and human being in general once he finds himself in these exceptional circumstances of his own making. "...A fallen soul seeks the deepest ravine possible," he announces with a flourish, creating a homespun philosophy, seemingly critical but actually justifying and defending himself, as if to say, "I'm finished, so I can do whatever I want..." For some reason he thought of the mute woman who gave him shelter in her house in Irkutsk: "I wish I could take her with me and go somewhere to the end of the earth where there weren't any people. I would forget how to talk, and in revenge, I would mock Tanya to my heart's content, then take pity on her and mock her some more. She would bear it all and be satisfied with the slightest bit of attention from me. When there are no other people around, you forget how to talk..."

Guskov sees that he has already isolated himself from people, and of course, this frightens him. But even more terrifying is the fact that he is dragging his wife, Nastyona, into the bottomless pit as well. And he does this knowingly, thinking only of himself and trying to assure that everything will turn out all right

for him. "I'll tell you right here and now, Nastyona, that not a single soul must know I'm here. If you tell anyone, I'll kill you as sure as I'm standing here. I've got nothing to lose anyway." These are the first words he says to his wife after three years of separation. Becoming an unwilling participant in her husband's crime, and voluntarily sharing his shame, Nastyona feels that the rest of the villagers still take her for one of them, but she is already a stranger. She doesn't dare react to their tears or joys; she cannot bring herself to second them in their conversations or songs.

Naturally, one crime is covered up by another, and having stifled one's conscience many times, especially when the matter is quite serious, there will surely come a day when one will cease to notice petty wrongdoings. There can be no measure here: this process takes place gradually. While taking (stealing!) fish from other people's nets, Guskov admits that not long ago, he would never have dreamed of touching someone else's property. He used to consider such deeds disgusting and is still capable of recognizing such deeds as disgusting, but clearly, he derives some pleasure from committing such acts, for they "keep him on his toes" and kindle "a meticulously disguised desire, concealed from all angles, to spite those who, unlike him, lived openly". This is theft, and as such, is covered by a statute of the criminal code. But there is another theft here as well which is punishable only by the conscience. However, Guskov does not even notice it, for his conscience is silent on this point. From the first day her husband returns, Nastyona feeds him, taking from herself and his elderly parents, and even from her friend Nadia's constantly hungry children, whom she loved to pamper when they came to visit. In this manner, Guskov turns his

wife into a thief as well, but he doesn't even give it a thought.

Andrei uses various ruses to placate his conscience even slightly. Sometimes, according to his reasoning, his desertion and treason are practically a blessing for his parents: "It's not clear what's better: to know that your son or husband is lying dead on the battlefield or to know nothing. A wife probably ought to know so she can decide what to do with her future... But what about a mother? How many of them would rather not know—would rather close their eyes to the bitter truth?.. Better to leave my parents with some hope, at least, even if the flame they carry in their hearts for me is a dead one." He has everything figured out to the last detail! But nothing of the kind was on Andrei's mind when he set off for home "for a day or two". These thoughts could not possibly have come to him then, for he had no idea that his momentary weakness would demand the concoction of such complex theories.

Beginning with his offense at the doctors, and convincing himself and his wife that there was good reason for his presentiment of doom, he grasps at Nastyona's pregnancy like a life-line: "Now I know I didn't come here for nothing. It was fate that sent me here, and now Lady Luck has done me in." But when she hears his lamentation, so choked with emotion, she thinks with grief and horror: "Why is he thinking only of himself? What about me? What will happen to me when people find out?"

The heart of the matter is that Guskov has been thinking "only of himself" from the very beginning. He is trying to drive his wife away "from other people, to keep her just for himself". He needs the child for one reason only: to justify himself, to prove

that his life was not wasted. His talk of suicide is obnoxious and tiresome as well as tormenting to his wife. But it is nothing but cruel bravado on his part, for when he comes across a cave hidden from sight in the taiga, Guskov rejoices: he has never dreamed of making such a find. Without yet knowing how or why, he is sure this hide-out will come in handy.

There is no question about it: Guskov admits his guilt before his homeland, his fellow countrymen, and finally Nastyona. But this admission always takes the form of an enticing and clever old adage: "To understand all is to forgive all." As if in preparation for a possible court martial, Guskov searches frantically for any justification: this is the only angle from which he can examine his crime. Moreover, he searches for some greater guilt by comparison: treason, for example. After all, he is not a Vlasov man fighting on the side of the Nazis. He has just moved away from death. Why should he get the same punishment? Self-vindication and fear of justly deserved punishment as well as human weakness can certainly be understood. However, Guskov's desire to return to a normal, honest life is accompanied by strange and, to put it mildly, compromising actions: weary of these tormenting reflections, Guskov "rose and kicked the log he was sitting on into the road. Someone would have to move it later". A mere detail? Obviously. But in that lies all the horror of the situation: whereas Guskov would previously have picked up the log and moved it off the road automatically before, now he intuitively kicks it into the road. Harming others has already become a norm for him, a habit.

Moreover, both the recognition of his guilt and his self-criticism drive him closer with every passing day to further accusations until it turns out that everyone

and everything around him is guilty of the crime he committed. It all began with a complaint about his fate. Then it continued with a "great secret chip on his shoulder" which was only to be expected and was generally an admission that Guskov was an alien in this world. "...He was on enemy territory. He had to keep his ear to the ground." And it culminated in vengeful spitefulness: "What a terrible war! Thank goodness I had the sense to run away instead of staying and getting my ass shot off!"

Having lost all moral and civic foundations, Guskov is risking a total loss of all semblance of humanity. He observes the agony of the wounded mountain goat with sadistic pleasure; blind rage engulfs him as he kills the calf before the very eyes of its mother. He realizes full well that this is a murder for which there is no justifiable reason. How terrifying is the episode wherein this man pits his ability to howl against a wolf. "It may come in handy to scare people off one day," thinks Guskov with malicious pride... "The wolf couldn't take it, and retreated." And further: "...But now Andrei could get by without him. When it got too nauseating, he would open the door and, as if in merry jest, he would howl pitifully and demandingly above the silence of the taiga, altogether resembling a wild beast. He would listen with rapture as everything for miles around froze from the terrifying sound."

The final result of this degenerative process is that Guskov ceases to be not only a member of society but a member of the human race as well.

This is the price of violating the norms of human behavior established over the centuries, the price of betraying those who believed in and trusted you. This story, didactic and harsh in its truthfulness, would

not be truthful and would not even be a story if Guskov's wife Nastyona were not standing beside him—not beside, but ahead of and above him!

Nastyona did not marry Andrei for love, as it were. She and her little sister were orphaned in the hungry year of 1933, and rather than slave away in the family of an aunt who was practically a stranger to her, she rushed into marriage without giving it a second thought. Everything would have been fine, for her husband "was kind" to her. Her life did not change drastically: she had simply "moved from one family to another: the endless chores were the same, only the household was different". But the greatest possible misfortune for a peasant woman befell Nastyona: she had no children.

Then, at the most inappropriate moment, when she had to hide not only her husband the deserter but also her unexpected, belated, bitter love for him, Nastyona got pregnant. We have already seen that Guskov interpreted this event as a justification for his actions, to drag in notions of "destiny", and to show concern for the continuation of his line. But he gives not a thought to Nastyona and to what a shameful matter this pregnancy is for her: after all, how will she be able to look people in the eye? The main problem for her is how to explain to her mother- and father-in-law, who already suspect something and have practically guessed that their son is somewhere around, what has happened. Moreover, Nastyona does not think about herself much either, for she has decided to stick by her husband to the end, even if their path leads to Golgotha. She thinks more about their future child, who must bear the shame of its father for the whole of its life. She is disturbed by the terrible fact that she is cut off from absolutely every-

one around her, including her husband. The necessity of lying torments her. She is even forced to steal, for after all, she has to feed her husband somehow...

In moments of gravest doubt, condemning Andrei in her mind and fearing these condemnations, Nastyo-na loses her sense of certainty that she has made the right decision in concealing and aiding her husband. She tries to calm herself with an old saying: the person you marry is the person you become.

From the first moment the main characters appeared, the differences between them have been perfectly obvious, making themselves felt on a moral and spiritual level as well as on a purely practical level of everyday life. The differences in character of husband and wife are traits which appeared in both of them in their early years. Their childhoods were quite dissimilar, and this could not help but effect the formation of their characters. It is not the case that Andrei had an easy time of it, for there were few who lived well during those years of hunger and want. But all the same, he was the only son of two working parents. (In the village, this is a rarity and plays a significant role, not just materially.) His parents' farm was a sound and productive one (even in the terrible years of the war they were not in great want compared with others). It is only natural that an only child would get more attention from his parents and have more privileges. Doubtless, the fact that Andrei did not have to compete for his parents' attention contributed to his egoism. But this is not Andrei's fault: you don't choose your parents, as the saying goes. But the fact remains that our two heroes grew up under totally different conditions. It is not surprising that in 1941, when he has to go to war, Andrei suffers from the loss of protection and comfort and perhaps

considers it unjust. Nastyona was accustomed early on to severe deprivation. While still a child herself, she had to care for her younger sister, and since, had been fully dependent on the kindness of strangers. Therefore, she could not help but know, at least on an unconscious, intuitive level, the true value of kindness and the sincere, disinterested help of others. Gratitude, open-heartedness, and the inner necessity of repaying any kindness a hundredfold and helping the oppressed and wronged with one's last bit of energy—qualities which are almost hypertrophied in Nastyona—are not always comprehensible to Andrei and his parents.

Andrei married Nastyona, even though she was hardly his "equal", and this "kindness" on his part, as well as the tragedy of her barrenness, largely determine the relations within the family: "From the very start, Nastyona dreamed of giving more love and care than she received in return." Nastyona kept this vow, and she considered that Andrei had the right to demand her obedience. She bore his rudeness and beatings even then, so there is no question that she would not continue to tolerate his abuse now, when he has found himself in a truly desperate situation. After all, she is the only one whose help he can count on...

Here, when he is the consumer and she is the provider, he becomes ever more the despot, and she—the unquestioning, sincerely loyal vassal. Finally, evolving to their ultimate expression, these roles take on the classic and unavoidable form of executioner and victim.

Andrei is eagerly awaiting the birth of the child so there will be some justification for his actions, at least in his own eyes. Nastyona has always dreamed of

bearing a child to "be of some use" to her husband. Seeming to pity his wife and her unenviable position, Andrei gloats: "Now fate has bound you to me even more tightly. I'd like to see how you try to get yourself out of this one." But Nastyona has no intention of trying to find a way out for herself. On Victory Day, when the great event unites the entire village into one big family, Nastyona cannot be where she belongs with her fellow-villagers: "She thought of Andrei for an instant, but with unexpected anger: because of him and him alone, she had no right to rejoice in the Victory. Then Nastyona realized he would feel even worse when he learned the war was over, so she began to pity him at once and wanted to go to him so they could be together..."

Nastyona's voluntarily sharing her husband's guilt seems to be the most important feature of her character to us; it is a genuine artistic discovery on the part of Valentin Rasputin.

The writer foresaw it already in *Borrowed Time* in the portrayal of old Anna. Awaiting the arrival of her youngest daughter Tanchora before her death, and realizing, but not yet wanting to admit that this desire is in vain, the mother, in her boundless love, "...was willing to blame ... not her daughter, but herself". This guileless bit of naive shuffling is obvious, although old Anna was not sure where her fault lay.

Further on, the old woman's reflections are of a purely psychological nature; they deal with the moral responsibility of each person for what occurs in the world—a responsibility which cannot be measured by any visible yardsticks and guilt which does not fall under the jurisdiction of any official judgement. How many times has this mother recalled her children who

perished during the war? "...It always seemed to her that she had lost them through some fault of her own, by not looking after them carefully enough."

This feature of the female personality in *Borrowed Time*, sketched so lightly that we might miss it altogether, becomes, in *Live and Remember*, the central, dominant feature of Nastyona's character—the one which determines all the others.

...On her first secret visit to Andrei before she has found the strength and courage to think through the misfortune which has befallen her, Nastyona, who had been taught by generations of the Russian peasant women always to be pitying someone or other, judges thusly: "Perhaps she was also responsible for his being here—not at fault but yet guilty. After all, she was the main reason he had wanted to come home. He had been afraid he would never see her again and would not get the chance to say a final word. He had not let his father or mother know he had come home. But he had confided in her."

This is only her first attempt to comprehend something so enormous and terrible she can't yet name it in so many words. Here, thus far, there is only a hint of forthrightness to prepare us for the impending tragedy. It inexorably draws the heroine closer to her ultimate doom. This forthrightness is lofty and purifying despite the fact that it brings about Nastyona's destruction. Here, an even bigger role is played by the "ordinary", every-day guilt Nastyona feels in the face of all who are unfortunate or hurt, such as Nadia's little daughter, whom she hasn't been to visit in a long time...

The confusion and sufferings will grow, however; the sensation of impending doom supplants everything quotidian and superficial. Finally Nastyona, a

simple peasant/ woman, finds herself standing face to face with the eternal and ultimately human moral imperative.

She examines her friend, Nadia, who conceals her great and permanent torment behind a facade of recklessness, and "bold" chatter, and she thinks: "Nadia is just pretending it wasn't her fault that she lost Vitya, that he was killed by enemy bullets. That's why she talks about it. That's why she asks about it. She doesn't have the vaguest idea what it is she's guilty of, or how she could have helped Vitya. But feel it, she does, and it torments her." Nastyona accepts this unexpected discovery: "There's something here that depends on the woman, too. It's a puzzle we've been trying to solve for years without hope of success. For centuries, we've been depending on blind intuition, passionate and uncertain conjuring, and when this wasn't enough, reverting to that selfsame guilt." And finally, without pity or remorse, Nastyona applies this measure to herself. She believes that she has played a part in Andrei's fate since the day he left home. She believes this and fears that she has probably lived for herself, thought of herself, and waited for him for her sake only. Now the waiting is over, and look what has happened. He has come home to her, but she cannot share this bitter secret with anyone.

It is a pity that Andrei Guskov never admitted or accepted the truth: that every person is constantly just as responsible for those close to him as he is for the whole of humanity. "Many of our vices come from the fact that we lack this feeling of guilt," Rasputin said later. Hungarian literary critic Miklòs Almàsi stated the tragedy of Nastyona very succinctly: "She attempts to help her husband become himself again, and only when all her efforts prove fruitless does she

‘pay’ for his crime with her death.”¹ Nastyona paid for her guilt with two lives: her own and that of her unborn child. But Andrei Guskov who had become an enemy in his own village and a beast among humans—Andrei Guskov crawled deeper into his lair to outlive his wife and child, the unborn individual who was to continue the Guskov line...

No one, even Andrei, guessed the guilt Nastyona felt within herself, and if he had guessed, he would not have had the right to judge her in any case.

Nastyona does not seek even the slightest justification for Andrei’s crime, and from the very first day he appears in the village, she admits her own guilt before her fellow villagers and society. On Victory Day, “she cannot talk or cry, or sing along with the rest of her neighbors”. Moreover, she conceals her happiness and misfortune even from those closest to her—proof that she is well aware of her guilt. Her death is not just a tragic expiation: it is at the same time retribution for a traitor who has been condemned to death. What human court could mete out a sentence more just or more deserved?

Let us put our emotions, our abstract sympathies and antipathies aside for the moment and examine how Nastyona’s fellow villagers reacted to her death and her secret guilt. When Mishka the farmer attempted to bury Nastyona in the cemetery for suicides, “the women wouldn’t let him”. Nastyona was laid to rest among her own. This could be read: “the village wouldn’t let him”, for in those early days after the war, there were practically no men in the villages. The dryly informative “They pitied her...” takes on an entirely different emotional color if we remember

¹*Sovietskaya literatura*, No. 6, 1978 (in Hungarian).

that in the village of old, the word "pity" was often a synonym for love, respect or particular sympathies... The fact that not a word is said about Andrei in connection with Nastyona means the villagers did not consider her guilty in the least.

* * *

As we have seen, almost all Rasputin's novellas and short stories deal in some way or other with World War II. There is nothing strange about this, especially for a writer, since this terrible event in Soviet history did not leave a single person in the country untouched, even those born after 1945. After all, Rasputin's heroes are generally middle-aged or elderly people. More precisely, some of them—Vasily and Vasilissa, old Anna, and Darya (*Farewell to Matyora*)—have already departed from this world. And others—Maria and Kuzma (*Money for Maria*) and old Anna's children or the friends and peers of Nastyona—would be considered elderly at the very least today.

The writer was too young to have taken part in any of the battles of World War II, and his native Siberia was never a bridgehead in the struggle, so we do not see the actual battles as such in his stories (with the exception of two or three episodes of Guskov's reminiscences). The war is taking place behind the scenes, while the focus is on the rear or the after-effects of the war. Almost all the characters are old men, children, or, more frequently than not, women—the sole work force, the bread-winners and upbringers of the younger generation. After the war, these extra burdens did not decrease, but for many, they were

added to the grief of widowhood and solitude.

War and woman... Two immeasurable themes with innumerable aspects. Nastyona was never at the front, and she never even heard a bomb exploding, but still, she died—a few days after the Victory, no less. She died never having known the joys of motherhood or the trials of normal married life.

Nadia, Nastyona's friend, was already a mother despite her youth. She had three small children she could not dress or feed on her own, no matter how hard she tried. Nadia put on a brave face, concealing her difficulties behind a mask of merriment and sprightliness. Otherwise, she would have lost her mind from the constant hungry, accusing glances of her young ones. And she would have to bear these glances not just that day and the next: she would have to face them all alone after the Victory, for she was destined to share the fate of old Anna. Do we have the right to judge the frustration, anger, and utter despair she feels when she hears that one of the village men has returned from the front: the widows envied even those women whose husbands returned from the war invalids or who reached home only to die within their own four walls.

The war mowed down millions of men, leaving a demographic problem that would be solved only many years later: the disproportionate number of women to men. But this was a superficial problem. There was another more subtle and fundamental one which could not be explained by any amount of facts and figures. In forcing women to take on the additional burden of men's work, not for a few years, but for decades, the war introduced its terrible changes into the most natural laws and norms. This is what the heroine of "Vasily and Vasilissa" feels about: "She

was sick and tired of women who acted like men. When would a new generation of real women appear?..” She was referring to women who acted like men not only in the sense of doing the hard physical labor of those years which made them less feminine. And not only of those women who had lost their fiancés and husbands and had therefore been deprived of the possibility of becoming wives and mothers. By women who acted like men, she is referring to a violation of the natural order which resulted in psychological, moral, and spiritual deformities. Such wounds are healed much more slowly by time and are perhaps incurable...

Rasputin has never written anything purely for children with the exception of a few very early short stories. But he depicts children lovingly and in great detail at every opportunity, even when they obviously figure only in passing episodes, like the amusing chubby four-year-old his hero Victor meets during his travels in the novella *Up and Down the River*. Children’s directness, curiosity, and clowning enliven his storytelling and ameliorate “serious” adult conversations.

Not all writers, even very talented ones, can portray children well. This requires a special gift, one of the essential factors of which is the ability to treat children as one’s equals. This is not really an ability, because any affectedness will catch the eye immediately; what is required here is precisely a gift of naturalness which excludes both cloying emotionality and rigid reasonableness.

In Rasputin’s works, the child, when its inner world is portrayed, is given the role of storyteller. It is hardly by chance that the age of the main characters of Rasputin’s early stories almost always coincid-

ed with that of the author at the time he was describing. Personal impressions, remembered experiences, serious concerns, and reactions serve their purpose here, making the situation as lifelike as possible. In this fashion, Rasputin makes his characters extremely natural for the time under consideration. And that time bore the terrible name of war...

For centuries, the unjust, undeserved, cruel misfortunes, deprivations, and punishments which fall the lot of children have tormented humanity: punishment without wrongdoing, payment for the mistakes or crimes of adults in accord with norms and laws established for them but without their participation or consent. Dostoyevsky's Alyosha Karamazov from *The Brothers Karamazov*, that devout soul who always turns the other cheek and pays evil with good, replies thusly to the question of his brother Ivan as to what he would do to a landowner who set his dogs on a child before the eyes of its mother: "I would shoot him!"

If we consider the many instances in which children die that occur in almost every work by Dostoyevsky as a very grave injustice in this vale of tears (every time he describes such an incident, the author's angry, tear-filled voice becomes almost a cry of terror and pain), we see how close to his views is old Anna in *Borrowed Time*. She had accepted the fact of her own death long ago and had come to terms with it, as she had the deaths of her sons at the front. What she could not understand or reconcile herself to was the death of a child under "natural" circumstances: "The only thing she couldn't understand was why little children died. She thought it a sin that parents should have to lower their children into the ground, and she thought the sin was God's. Such a death was as tiny

as its victim, and totally senseless. Death played with the baby, got carried away, and touched it accidentally. And where was God at the time? What was He thinking of? It was a sin when a new-born who didn't understand why it saw light in its eyes, or why it felt hunger in its belly, had to lose its life at once, not having an ounce of guilt to justify such treatment. Why had it been born at all, if it was to be so deceived? Why had it been shown the world and given human understanding?"

The innocence of a child is perfectly obvious, and the postulate of original sin is simply one of the cruellest and falsest inventions of the sanctimonious. In one of his later short stories which we will discuss further on, Rasputin says: "...From the first hours of their existence, above the heads of our children hangs the enormous weight not of the original sin but of the burden of their fathers' debts before humanity." By the way, it is paradoxical and perhaps a small comfort to humanity that children do not know this truth and, consequently, do not accuse their elders.

The first-grader in the short story "Dimka and I" begins his tale about himself in an entirely serious and ordinary manner: "The war wasn't over yet, but Dimka and I already knew that victory was ours. Therefore, on September 1, 1943, he and I headed for school instead of running away to the front... On the way, Dimka said:

" 'We'll finish the first grade and see how things stand then.' "

This calm good judgement of early childhood which blends so marvelously with play, this unpreparedness for the serious cares forced upon them and semi-consciousness of the enormity and tragedy of what was taking place in the world wrings one's heart.

Rasputin has penetrated the psychology of the child with amazing accuracy and is remarkably gentle in his relations to the individual, especially little ones.

During the trying days of the war, with its deprivation and suffering, the spiritual development of the person was accelerated. It is no doubt possible to see some good in this early spiritual maturity. But is it sensible or—and this is the main point—humanitarian to pay for this maturity with the best years of one's life, depriving a child of the most elementary advantages and joys prescribed for it by nature? Do we have such a right? In the story "Dimka and I", one is touched and surprised by the grown-up discussion of the young heroes, but Nadia's children in *Live and Remember* are neither touching nor amazing: they are always hungry and ragged, understanding the desperate situation of their mother with grown-up minds...

The most popular of Rasputin's early stories about children is "French Lessons". The time is the same: the difficult, fatherless, hungry years that followed the war. The writer does not really attempt to conceal the autobiographical nature of this piece. "I started ~~the~~ fifth grade in 1948." A bit of mental arithmetic tells us that if this story is not about Rasputin himself, it is surely about one of his classmates. The woman to whom it is dedicated may well have been a prototype of his teacher. Finally, the details of everyday life surrounding the hero are not yet vast but make up the whole of his world for the time being. Moreover, they are of the type which cannot be invented or constructed from the descriptions of others. For example, the scenes where the boys are tossing coins are written with all the directness and meticulousness of a child's memory. "I seldom struck the coin with the stone, but here too I had my own special method of throw-

ing the stone so that it wouldn't let the coin spin and, falling back from it, made it flip."

...Moreover, this use of detail is fully justified, for we are not talking about the games of adults or of amusements: our young hero is playing for money so he will have a chance to buy a half-liter of milk every day to prevent anemia. That is why he is so reasonable and calculating as he plays, firmly insisting that all the rules be followed.

In "French Lessons", unlike the other short stories of that cycle and period of Rasputin's work, which can be considered *études* or sketches, we are already dealing with a full-blown character. We learn not only about his deeds but also about his psychological make-up and the social aspects of his existence. For the first time, this eleven-year-old boy is torn by circumstances from his family and native village. He is taken from his customary surroundings and thrust into something new and unseen. His homesickness and constant gloom are hardly surprising and evoke the pity and sympathy of the reader.

However, our young hero realizes that on him rest the hopes of his family and the whole village: after all, he is the only one who, in the opinion of his fellow-villagers, was meant to be a scholar. This opinion is confirmed in his new school and by his new circle of acquaintances.

Obviously, Lydia Mikhailovna, the French teacher, is taking a big risk when she tosses coins with her pupil at her house in secret—the boy is emaciated and refuses to borrow money, so she finds a way around his pride. It is equally clear that she is aware of her pupil's exceptional abilities and is prepared in any way—permitted or not—to help him develop them.

Naturally, the boy's character matures through

association with the people life has sent his way. Just as naturally the personalities of the individuals surrounding the boy are revealed parallel to his own: the group of kids he hangs out with and the leader invariable in any such group with its minions and outcasts; the relatives who give the boy lodging; and finally, Vasily Andreyevich, the school principal who, alas, is not as attentive and great-hearted as Lydia Mikhailovna. He is a man of the old school: spare the rod, and spoil the child. Discipline first and foremost. His conversations with his charges are reminiscent of a warden speaking with a group of prisoners. He drives the unfortunate teacher of French from the school, never thinking for a moment that he was the one who forced her to use unpedagogical methods. He does not doubt the correctness of his actions for a second. Such individuals never have doubts, and therein lies the security of their cruel triumph...

* * *

Invariably, Rasputin's strength lies in the depth of his psychological examination of the hero. Therefore, his attempts to localize the action are fully understandable. This explains his particular success in those pieces where the field of action is exceptionally narrow. Note that in *Borrowed Time*, he limits his examination to the interactions between the members of only one family. In *Live and Remember*, for all practical purposes, the only two characters are Nastya and Andrei. The chapters are divided between them alone.

In *Farewell to Matyora*, the author is interested in

the fate of a village rather than in a particular individual. That is also the case in *Money for Maria*. In both of these works, the author uses an idea rather than a character as his starting point. Therefore, what strikes the eye is a given form, firmness, rationality of construction, and mainly, the illustrative nature of a person or event. The characters are chosen for their ability to illustrate a given idea. The writer needs the incident with the money (*Money for Maria*) to go trekking around the village with Kuzma, visiting precisely those people who confirm best of all conclusions drawn earlier. This technique is far from new, of course, and hides nothing particularly bad. After all, Gogol did exactly the same thing in *Dead Souls* when he sent Chichikov to the most vivid and most typically necessary examples of landowners and officials for the purpose of illustrating his point. The individuality of Rasputin's talent has insured him against banality and mere schematics.

We shall refrain from discussing possible resolutions to the various situations in Rasputin's works, but shall rather simply examine the solution the writer himself chose and see how well it enabled him to accomplish the task at hand. We consider that enough has been said about the central conceptions and images of *Money for Maria*, for here, we are interested in one problem only: how the writer presents the unified image of a village working from a multitude of impressions and aspects.

Old Anna and Nastyona are fine examples of how Rasputin scrupulously paints meticulous, full-blooded portraits of his characters, down to the minutest details of their souls. These can be compared to oil portraits with all possible shades and tones appearing in the rich palette. But drawing and graphics are also

perfectly acceptable art forms with great expressive possibilities and advantages. Following Kuzma around to the many households of his fellow villagers and examining his chance fellow-travellers on the train, we see that Rasputin does not present exhaustive psychological portraits of all these personages in every single case. But nonetheless, thanks to his keen power of observation and ability to pick out that which is most essential in a given individual, the writer presents us with an entire gallery of living, unrepeatable, memorable characters.

Rasputin devotes only a couple of lines to the image of school principal Yevgeny Nikolayevich in *Money for Maria*. Accenting the fact that this is an educated man, Rasputin cloaks his stinginess in loquacious tirades about his perpetual readiness to help those close to him. But these few lines are quite sufficient for us to form an accurate opinion of this character. It is sufficient to observe how the principal sends the neighbor boy to Kuzma several times to assure him that the money will come without a doubt, even trying Kuzma's patience to the limit to present a clear impression of how that individual relates to those close to him, to his pupils, and so forth.

The scene where the collective farm chairman asks the specialists to lend Kuzma the salaries they have earned but have not yet received is quite instructive. Perhaps they don't really need the cash that much and could get along without it somehow for a month: after all they live in the village and each has his own garden plot, livestock, and savings to boot—the situation is not all that critical—but still the choice has been posed. No one can avoid making a decision, and the reaction of each person is sufficient for us to judge his moral qualities.

It is a village like any other. Different people give Kuzma different receptions and sympathize with his misfortune to varying degrees. Right next to the miser Stepanida is Aunt Natalya who willingly gives Kuzma the money she had set aside for her own funeral. Old Gordei proves no less loquacious than the well-wishing school principal, but he regrets sincerely the misfortune which has befallen Kuzma's family, and brings a few roubles he has begged off his son. These individual drawings and episodes combine to give an impression of the collective as a whole with its petty and important cares, connections and mutual relations. Since this was the author's aim all along, it is not surprising that he succeeded so well.

Despite a totally different approach to his material and other aims and means of achieving them, the village as a whole exists as a character in *Live and Remember*, as well—the village which both Andrei and Nastyona lose forever.

While in *Money for Maria*, the misfortune of a single family was destined to reveal the various moral and spiritual levels of the villagers, in *Live and Remember*, the village as a whole experiences a grave misfortune and reacts as a single entity. Of course, this does not mean the characters are standardized, but the petty differences fade in the face of the higher ideals which unite them. This is not the will of the writer at work here, but the natural, century-old mores and ideas of the people.

Throughout the whole of the war, the most significant even for the village was the occasional return of a wounded front-line soldier. And this happened extremely rarely. Then there were the death notices which almost every household received. Thus, the grief or joy of one family became the grief or joy of the

entire village. Though they were hungry themselves, as were their children, they always observed the Russian custom of placing victuals and spirits on the table for the departed at the funeral feast. And the portion of their dead husbands and sons was never touched by anyone in the household, no matter how hungry they were. Here in this village, in this novella, there is no such thing as alien grief: everything is common. The joy of Liza Vologzhina whose husband returns unexpectedly is a real holiday for the whole village, although like all the celebrations of those days, it is mixed with grief and bitter tears.

There are few "crowd scenes" in the novella, but one of the most touching is that in the village on Victory Day. All the villagers gathered in the village library, and everyone who could brought something for the common pot. The boys spent the entire day fishing and went to the forest for birch sap to make juice. The new collective farm chairman, Maxim Vologzhin, proposed the first toast.

This man had probably never made a speech in his life, so he suggested that they "should be listening to someone else", to some more experienced talker. But it was unlikely that even a trained orator could have made such a lofty yet humble statement as this simple soul: "Stand up, people, each one of you, and look with all your eyes at this day. Remember it for all eternity. There has never been a war like this in all of history, and it would follow that there has never been such a Victory. So let's commemorate it, my friends."

Suddenly, at the height of the merry-making, someone remembered that not everyone was present: the old miller, who was quite deaf, obviously had not heard their own village salute fired earlier, and still

did not know about the victory. So everyone rushed off to the mill, and when old Stepan appeared, they cupped their hands to his ears and tried to shout out each other: "Gramps, the war is over!"

..Only then, when the last man in Atamanovka learned what had happened, did they finally believe the news themselves: the war was over, indeed!

"Travel Notes" is the subtitle borne by some of the editions of Rasputin's work *Up and Down the River*. I must admit that when I first read the manuscript, I found to my surprise that I had an active dislike for the piece. Written immediately after *Borrowed Time*, it seemed to me to represent a decline in the author's abilities: he was not as demanding of himself as previously, it seemed the well-springs of his creativity had run dry. He had never written directly about himself, yet here, he resorted to "confessional" prose. Moreover, it did not seem quite the thing for a young writer who had published only two novellas, superb though they were, suddenly to begin making public his personal opinions in something that resembled a diary. That was my first impression.

I did not pick up this work for several years thereafter. I had no desire to reread it, especially since subsequently, Rasputin published another book—*Live and Remember*. After reading it, I recalled *Up and Down the River*.

I shall dwell upon my "first reading" of it in order not to return to it later. It is rather difficult to become accustomed to Rasputin's writing. "Getting into" the material requires a certain amount of effort on the part of the reader. Unhurried, "traditional" storytelling, detailed, almost overly meticulous examination of the subject at hand, extreme realism

in depictions of everyday life and the given social environment, profound interest in ethnography, exhaustive descriptions of landscapes—paradoxically, all these characteristics of the finest 19th century prose seem almost anachronistic today. Well, if it's in Turgenev, it's all right, but nowadays... We race through the landscapes described by contemporary writers in search of the action: what we want is a bit of intrigue... Rasputin made the following remark about this phenomenon: "...No, literature is not supposed to bear the reader forward at break-neck speed like a racehorse galloping in some unknown direction. The reader, for his own good, must rein in his mount so he can commune with literature."¹

Once you get accustomed to Rasputin's style, you will read and reread your favorite passages with pleasure, savoring those spots which are so delightfully 19th-century. When I reread *Up and Down the River*, for example, I was amazed that I could have been so indifferent the first time to such heartfelt prose. A particularly fine example is the description of the thunderstorm which had such a great effect on the young hero of the story:

"Here it was not so dark. From the ice was reflected a pale gray flicker which indicated that the frozen surface of the river was just as it had been before. Nothing had changed there since evening. The river seemed to have calmed down and grown still after the long and fruitless attempts to break the ice. Not understanding what was happening to him, why he was here and not at home in bed, little Vitka grew stiff with terror.

¹ A. Olshansky, "The Hundred and Fifth Kilometer", *Sovremennik*, 1977, Introduction, p. 5

“Somewhere far off in the taiga rumbled a thunderstorm, gathering strength as it headed straight for the village, threatening to flatten it, but suddenly died away before it reached the houses. The storm was coming. What the boy took to be the roaring of the river was the rumbling of the firmament, marking the spring’s first thunderstorm, unexpected and still modest enough. There was a flash of lightning which disappeared almost instantaneously, then more thunder right above the river, not far at all from the village.

“The mighty sky was terrifying now, its edges merging with the ground and subsiding into a fathomless shadow. The enormous, restless mass was suspended overhead weighed down upon the earth. The dark ponderous clouds changed in form as they moved, dusting the ground with spots and bands of black. In the quiet intervals between the peals of thunder, a barely audible sound like the rustling of clouds or the dull whistling of the wind could be heard. The air near the ground was alarmingly still and empty of the usual penetrating aromas of spring and the customary freshness of the night: the thunderstorm had sucked all these smells from the air...

“The peals of thunder called forth rain time and again in the stillness, and the air all around was filled with naught but the loud rumbles which followed the frequent flashes of lightning before which everything pressed low to the ground and trembled. Still, there was not enough space for the mighty storm; it was suffocating with anger: soon, something horrible was bound to happen.

“And happen, it did. The lightning flashed long and thin as usual, but it didn’t go out: it twisted about as if entangled in a net, and danced in a large circle, leaving a terrible blue flame in its wake. A wild

rumble of some unknown force immediately rocked the firmament, shattering it to bits.

“The boy screamed and collapsed to the ground, unable to rise for a moment, but soon, he was on his feet again. Though he was in no condition to see or hear at all, nonetheless, by some miracle, he heard a pale reflection of a mighty sound splitting the heavens, and that very sound was repeated somewhere not far from him. In fearsome yet unexpectedly joyous premonition, he raised his head and saw the ice in the center of the river break. It was then borne away by the waters. The crack had only just appeared and was still quite narrow.

“Then, right away, the rains began...”

This prose has a joyous and purifying effect on the reader, giving him no cause to complain of slow-moving or overbearing passages, and leaving him only with a feeling of gratitude and pride for the author. Rasputin has remained true to himself in his later stories and novellas as well...

Rereading the novella, I became convinced once more of how deceiving first impressions can be. In general, they cannot be trusted when one is dealing with Rasputin, because it is doubtful whether he himself would consider any of his own works complete.

I have already mentioned “confessional prose” and stated earlier that *Up and Down the River* reads almost like a diary. I must repent of this, my first impression, after reading the original version of the manuscript. One feature of Rasputin’s writing should be noted: none of his long stories are written in the first person. Even here, in these sketches in the form of a novella, where the main hero, the young writer Viktor, displays many characteristics obviously drawn from Rasputin himself, the author hesitates to write

openly of himself, and thus creates a double to take his place in the story.

...So a certain writer Viktor goes to visit his parents in the village after a long absence. The river, which Viktor thinks of so often without ever once calling it by name, has changed a great deal over the years. He grew up on this river and lives near it even now, though in a large town. All the other rivers have names for him, but the one he considers his own remains simply The River.

There have been many changes on the river, and Viktor has changed a great deal as well. To begin with, the ancient steamboat with its enormous paddle has been replaced by a modern diesel-engined ship where he, a former third-class passenger, now has his own private berth. The stretch of river along which Viktor grew up is now hardly a river at all, but is unjustifiably and pompously known as a "sea", for a large reservoir has been built on that spot. Moreover, Viktor himself is no longer a naive, hot-headed, easily-led university student, but a writer who is well-known, at least in the area where he grew up. The village our hero is planning to visit—his village—no longer exists: it has been drowned by the waters of the reservoir, and only the chimneys of the old Russian stoves rise above the surface like lonely gravestones, marking the place where his ancestors lie buried.

Rasputin's novella contains none of the regrets which have become traditional with respect to the passing or even destruction of old ways of life. Nor does he condemn what is presently considered civilization. To be absolutely fair, the first cottage that was ever built in these parts of the taiga, and the first boat that was ever set to float on the river were elements that played no mean role in the passing and

destruction of the old ways. The writer, along with his hero, or more precisely, the writer, through the person of the main character of this novella, does not only attempt to comprehend the significance of what has happened and the changes which have occurred, but he also tries to fit into the new geography, the new village, and the resulting new way of life. He wants to understand his parents, friends, and acquaintances for whom this process of adaptation is not nearly so voluntary and desired as it is for him.

Unquestionably, it is no simple matter to build an enormous dam and construct a hydroelectric power station in Siberia. But it is much more difficult for the people involved—for any of them, but especially for those who have been peasants since time immemorial and are therefore by nature conservative and not highly mobile—to restructure their souls, to give up their familiar and ordinary way of life and the only form of work they understand. It is practically impossible for a city person who is accustomed to contemporary transport, business trips, hotels, and vacations at seaside resorts to understand people who are distressed by the necessity of moving a few kilometers from their old homes, especially since the new houses are far more modern, convenient, and comfortable than the old ones.

It is difficult for a city dweller to understand the pain of a woman who is now the janitor at the local school but longs for her old job on the collective farm, though it was harder and more physically exhausting... The residents of urban apartment houses rarely know their neighbors, even if they have lived in the same building for years. But in the country, people who live in the same place are almost like relatives, and when the collective farm, logging company, and other

local enterprises are divided up, there are many tortured and bitter partings of ways...

Therefore, there is nothing surprising about the seriousness with which Rasputin describes the moving of a village to a new location in both *Farewell to Matyora* and his novella *Up and Down the River*, preceding his major works.

"Nothing like it had happened in the village since the war had ended. The men drank their glasses of vodka in parting. The women, through their tears, gave final instructions about the livestock and kitchen gardens. The frightened children ran about in a pack. Hugging and wailing loudly in the middle of the road were two old women: Viktor's grandmother and their neighbor, old Lukeya. They had lived next door to each other all their lives and had gone to one another's houses to drink tea every single day... Now old Lukeya was moving away to live with her children... Someone was sitting stock-still at the cemetery, and someone else was running at the last minute to fetch a pot the neighbors had borrowed. The bitter smoke from the stables which had been burned the previous evening did not rise: it hung in the street as a reminder... At last, they set off with bitter weeping, loud lamentations, and howls of grief."

Already laughing at themselves, the men told Viktor about how, during the last few days before the village was flooded, without their wives' knowledge, they had found a few free moments to return to the razed village. Some of the villagers had had to be dragged away by force. Viktor accepts the advantages of "civilization" in the same humorous vein: pure water must be fetched from the "sea" in a boat, and the old chimneys serve as "resting places" for swimmers, since the village was not completely submerged.

These are all details, of course, since nothing of significance for society as a whole ever comes easily or painlessly. Sacrifices must invariably be made, and it is fortunate if these sacrifices are simply on a material level, leaving moral values intact...

This novella is not inferior to Rasputin's long stories in skill of technical execution. The same ability to present the moral and inner state of a person are displayed. "...He knew that only in the village, with his mother and father, would he be able to rest fully: he could go wherever he wanted and do whatever popped into his head. His getting accustomed to that lifestyle again would be like a return to childhood; he could remain there in blissful forgetfulness for a long time, not thinking anything about himself or anyone else, but being subject only to the simplest and most easily realizable of desires. He already felt more at home than he had for years, as if every cell in his body had at last got untangled and found its proper place." There is a bit of very accurate and uncompromising self-analysis at this point which is softened by a touch of humor: "...There was another difference; he had traded happiness for success, for the latter is easier and less dangerous to deal with—if it passes, it's no great loss. As he grew older, it seemed he was teaching himself not to take any major risks." Here, too, as in *Money for Maria*, Rasputin adds an appropriate and extremely necessary encounter with a family on the new ship plying those waters...

Rasputin possesses one quality which is very rare indeed: the ability to rejoice at another's happiness—he neither envies the lucky individual, nor does he draw any comparisons with his own life. In the novella Viktor meets a friendly young family in the restaurant on board ship quite by chance. Perhaps subcon-

sciously, he is already seeking future meetings with these people, for he has warmed to them very quickly. But the argument these strangers have seems to offend him personally. He was prepared to remember them as “wonderful and hopeful ... the personification of eternal love in one human nest”, but now, when he sees the “aloof, bitterly solemn face” of the woman, Viktor feels “neither pity nor sympathy for her”, since there was a place for happiness and unhappiness alike, and there was no reason to show one’s emotions to every passer-by.

Viktor had hoped in vain for a quiet vacation in the village, “far from the madding crowd”. He didn’t have the kind of character which could allow him to remain indifferent to the cares and pains of others. He could not pass them by or ignore them, much less feign that all was well. Purely professional problems, having nothing to do with creativity as such, haunt the writer here as well (and there is nothing surprising about this). He is confused and distracted, thrown off balance somehow, by the reality he comes in touch with; that keeps him from writing, practically speaking.

Here, for the first time in a work of fiction, Rasputin allows himself to discuss openly the essence of writing and his opinions on creativity. He dwells on this topic for only a couple of lines, but this brief passage is crucial to an understanding of all Rasputin’s works... A reviewer in a local paper criticizes Viktor for the excessive psychologism in his works—for probing the innermost feelings of his characters—claiming that “there are no clearcut protagonists and villains in his stories, but only people with shifting philosophies of life with whom one is not at all sure if one should become friends.” The irritation with which the hero

of the novella responds is perfectly justified: "As if one looked for friends in books or by seeing who talks the loudest." Of course, Viktor is exaggerating here, for often, people do find friends in books, not to mention the fact that certain books themselves can become friends which remain faithful throughout a person's life. The point here is something else entirely, and Viktor (i. e., Rasputin), confirms this. In true literature and art, there is no black and white. And since we consider Rasputin's works genuine literature, we do not follow the footsteps of this reviewer who is looking for "clearcut protagonists and villains". Later, after he had written his major stories, Rasputin thus clarified the opinion of his writer-hero from the novella *Up and Down the River*: "From books the reader learns not about life, but about emotions. In my opinion, literature must inculcate feelings first and foremost—kindness, purity of heart, and a sense of worth and dignity most of all."

Rasputin is a complex, erudite individual—and this is only natural—with a library many of his colleagues envy, as befits a real writer. We will not dwell on his profound knowledge of history, especially the history of his native region, but will recall, rather, Karamzin and Pushkin, for whom creativity in general was unthinkable outside a historical context. We have already spoken of the writer's serious interest in cinema and theater, and we have only to add that after the publication of his first long stories, he got to know these genres on a professional level, adapting his works for theater and assisting directors to interpret them for the cinema. I would like to recall in particular the friendship of Rasputin with Elem Klimov and the late Larissa Shepitko, the directors who produced the film version of *Farewell to Matyora*, en-

titled *Farewell*. Many critics noted that in the film, the authors ranged far afield of the original book, changing the emphasis in several incidents, and altering the writer's style, among other things. However, he accepted the work almost without reservations, so great was his respect for their work, and so profound was his conviction that a talented director has the unquestionable right to his own interpretation of the screen version of a work. Naturally, the demonstration of his encyclopedic knowledge would be inappropriate in a work of fiction, but articles and essays are another matter entirely. Reading his articles, "Irkutsk Is with Us", "Baikal, Baikal...", and other later publicistic works by Rasputin, we see how easily he deals with architecture, painting, music, many branches of ecology, and other esoteric branches of knowledge. It is hardly worth mentioning the trust readers develop in the author when they become aware of this.

The novella *Farewell to Matyora* continues and develops the theme of *Up and Down the River*, which deals with two villages: retrospectively the final days of the old village of the hero's childhood, and the new village of the present. In *Farewell to Matyora*, the author limits himself to parting with the old village, concentrating all his attention and the techniques at his disposal on the moral and ethical aspects of what is taking place. Despite the novella's strong publicistic note, it is still fiction.

Another conclusion which can be drawn might seem paradoxical. In his previous novellas, Rasputin took as the basis the story of some person and the examination of his character and inner world. The events described took place within the personages he wrote about. But here, in *Farewell to Matyora*, we are

dealing with the history of the village as a whole, and the overall character of its residents is presented.

In an interview with a correspondent from one of Moscow's magazines, Rasputin seemed to deal in particular with the idea behind these two works (*Up and Down the River* and *Farewell to Matyora*) although the discussion dealt with creativity in general. "I am by no means attempting to defend the old village here, as some critics have accused me of doing, I am dealing with the inner worlds of millions of people who are in the process of transformation and will not be the same tomorrow as they are today. Who can deal with this complex process better than a writer?"¹

Grandiose changes are taking place in Siberia today. The region has an unbelievable wealth of natural resources which man is naturally attempting to exploit in his interest. All the newspapers and magazines of the country, all the radio and television stations carry reports on the construction sites there, on the factories being built on its vast territory, on the hydroelectric power stations, highways, and scientific research centers. Moreover, dozens, if not hundreds of works of fiction are published which deal with the feats of these modern-day pioneers who are so worthy of our respect and inspire us with their enthusiasm and romanticism.

Rasputin has chosen a different approach, at least according to today's standards. "In the limitless

¹The preciseness with which a reader expressed this very thought in a letter published in the magazine *Literaturnoye obozrenie* (No. 4, 1977) is quite remarkable: "This is not bidding farewell to the village in the literal sense of the word. It is about the links which forge a human life, no matter where it takes place."

expanses of Siberia are scattered countless villages and hamlets, small and large, where people lead sober lives in a fashion which has become fixed and predictable over the centuries. Literature has stubbornly ignored the existence of these modest individuals, despite the fact that they, our contemporaries, have created considerable material benefits for society. They are real people with their own particular fates and passions. How can I remain silent about these unsung heroes when I know them so well?" How do the grandiose transformations taking place in Siberia affect these people? How do they react to the changes occurring in their traditional way of life? We can determine the degree to which their fates and personalities are dependent upon what is taking place around them by examining the works of Valentin Rasputin, for, as the writer himself says, he regards these changes, "not as a mere observer, an outsider who has come to tame the land, to transform this wonderful region despite its harsh climate, but with the eyes of a native Siberian who loves the land where he lives sincerely, thinking of it not as some enormous construction site, but as his native land, the land of his forefathers, in the place where his children and grandchildren will live as well."¹

The concept of patriotism, unless it is warmed by ardent feelings of personal interest and a lofty sense of responsibility to one's contemporaries and descendants, remains abstract and "alien". Rasputin assiduously avoids high-flown phrases but shows his sincere love of his native Siberia by his daily concern and efforts on behalf of its well-being. Thus, like zealous masters of their land, Rasputin and his

¹ *Voprosy literatury*, No. 9, 1976, pp. 145, 150.

friends—writers and journalists—toured hundreds of kilometers of the area which later became the bottom of the Ust-Ilimsk Reservoir. The slightest sign of bad management, indifference, or bungling on the part of those responsible for the flooding of the area was taken extremely personally, as a matter of utmost importance. Of course, removing the timber from the millions of hectares of land to be flooded was no easy task, and the slightest irresponsibility on the part of just two or three individuals could have resulted in the destruction of enormous amounts of valuable raw materials.

There are unchanging moral values which cannot be bought for any sum; the graves of one's ancestors, for example, have been sacred in all times and among all peoples, for they have always tied a people to a particular piece of land or place.

In a certain sense, in the novella *Farewell to Matyora*, Rasputin has returned to the problems he touched upon in passing in the story *Up and Down the River*. Only there, the circumstances connected with the moving of the village from the place to be flooded were viewed through the eyes of a person who had already come in contact with this process and was familiar with the fact. A certain amount of irony resounds in the hero's tale of the changes and breakdown of traditions that take place in the lives of the people who were moved to make way for the man-made sea.

In *Farewell to Matyora*, these dramatic events have not yet taken place in the village, but they are fast approaching. Everyone, both the author of the narration and the heroes, are living with the premonition that misfortune is close at hand. And indeed, it was a tragedy for the people who had lived all their lives on this island and buried their parents and children

who died before their time in this earth—christening it Matyora (mater, Mother)—to part with it forever. These were people who got homesick even when they left their native village for a day or two...

“The first tiller of the soil who got the idea of settling on the island a bit more than three hundred years ago was perspicacious and farsighted, for he was right when he decided that he would never find a better piece of earth. The island was only about three miles long, but it was shaped more like a flat-iron than a narrow hair-ribbon. There was room for fields and forest, and even a tiny swamp with merry bullfrogs...” How could a man of the earth resist such a fine place to settle down and farm?

But during the construction of an electric power station on the Angara River, this island would be flooded and would find itself at the bottom of a manmade sea. So the land had to be cleared: everything that could be moved had to be taken from the island and the rest—the forest and village—burned to the ground. Special brigades, popularly known as “arson squads” were formed to clear the zones that were to be flooded. When such a squad arrived on the island, it decided to begin its “demolition work” with the cemetery, this naturally evoked such outrage among the islanders that the squad was forced to abandon the island immediately without finishing what it had set out to do.

However, even in this alarm-filled, disturbing novella where the author’s sympathies are clearly on the side of the “victims”, in this agitated and passionate narration where the emotional tension raises prose to the heights of poetry, the author remains true to himself. Despite whatever feelings he may have, he is objective. Here, emotion is tempered by knowledge which does not allow him to make one-

sided judgements, idealizing the personalities of village-dwellers in general.

Sheer poetry fills the scenes where old Darya bids farewell to the graves of her relatives and her cottage, which she cleans and fixes up on the day before it is to be burned in the same way a corpse is washed and prepared before the funeral. But her reflections on the past, on what is taking place now, and the inevitable events of the morrow can hardly be considered an outright rejection of the new—that which we proudly boast of as progress. Her rich life experience and basic sense of justice simply will not allow her to close her eyes to the aspirations of youth. Matyora, which has become the entire world for her, cannot be the same for her grandchildren or for the young people who have left the village to work on the construction of the hydroelectric power station which has become the reason behind Matyora's destruction...

Darya's fellow-villagers in the novella are as varied and dissimilar as their prototypes in real life. Petrukha, the village lazybones and chatterbox, burns his cottage, which has already been purchased by a museum as an outstanding example of wooden architecture, without even waiting for the "arson squad". He is impatient to receive the insurance money for his house. And as soon as he gets his hands on the cash, he squanders it immediately. Moreover, Petrukha goes to work for the "arson squad" in other villages, amazing even his former neighbors who were never surprised at anything he did.

Klavdia does not wait till her turn to burn her house either, but she has other reasons: she lives all alone and is tired of the endless difficulties of farm work. The resettlement frees her from the drudgery

of her old life and gives her a chance to get out into the world. What awaits her there is not important: the main thing is to escape her present misery as quickly as possible...

If we view Rasputin's novella solely or primarily as a social chronicle in the form of a fictional account, as the narration of a concrete, actual event—the flooding of a particular piece of earth, a village, an island—then we can say that the writer sees something tragic in this complex and unpleasant life-and-death situation. Everyone realizes, the author included, that the flooding of Matyora is both necessary and inevitable. Furthermore, it is obvious that the planners of such a massive project as the Angara Hydroelectric Power Station—a project of crucial importance to the whole of the Soviet Union—could hardly take into account all the possible situations that would arise as a result of the building of the station. Nor could they predict the reaction of every single individual affected by it in one way or another. However, in point of fact, those who carry out such projects, when it comes down to concrete actions and situations, simply must take such things into account.

Valentin Rasputin is a serious enough writer to realize the unavoidable price of technological progress. In the novella, he never questions the necessity of building the power station as a result of which Matyora must be flooded: that is not the subject at hand in any sense. Rather he examines the price of the station's construction and poses the question of whether payment in that most valuable of currencies—the fate of human beings—is always justified.

Of course, Pavel, old Darya's son, is right when he says: "Life is what it is so that it can be continued. Life will go on, no matter what, bearing up under any

hardships and clinging to any soil—bare rock or quicksand—if it has to.” That being the case, it will surely survive in a new “prosperous, beautiful village with neat, even rows of houses”. Aside from being built in the wrong place, this new village is too neat and orderly for people to live in anyway. What reason was there to put the villagers through such an ordeal and create so many unnecessary difficulties for them? Why was the fact that man does not live by bread alone scorned so overtly? Nothing can replace the simple goods and chattel or the kitchen gardens by the village houses on the island of Matyora which is so dear to these people. The spiritual world and traditions which have grown up on the island over the centuries, and the philosophy, ethics, and sense of poetry which accompany them cannot be transported to the new village, no matter how well it is built or how beautiful the un-lived-in houses are...

However, might it not be the case that part of the troublesome price which must be paid here is but a side-effect of progress, which is usually beneficial? Such things do happen to be sure: progress always demands sacrifices which in the end are justified by an increase in the general well-being. Rasputin also raises this question in his novella. Certain moral sacrifices are necessary, but blasphemy is never permissible. The egoistic concept that the end justifies the means is usually applied in achieving means desired by some particular person rather than those necessary to society as a whole. And any concept which allows the use of blasphemous measures can never be connected in any way with the idea of the general good or well-being.

Let us examine a single example of the social func-

tioning of this type of consciousness in the novella. The residents of Matyora want to know by what right the cemetery is being razed to the ground. They receive the reply: "‘We have our orders. There is Comrade Zhuk from the department responsible for the zone to be flooded... Comrade Zhuk is a high-ranking official...’"

"‘Well, if he’s the official responsible for this, then let him tell us who allowed our cemetery to be razed to the ground? People are buried there—not wild animals. How could he dare to let these graves be desecrated?’"

"‘Comrades, there’s been a misunderstanding on your part. Special regulations exist in this case, after all...’ Zhuk knew the power of such words as ‘permission, rules, and regulations’ in such situations..."

For the villagers, Zhuk is an official representative of the government. How does he impose his will on the people’s consciousness? First, he emphasizes the impersonal nature of his position, which is reflected in his consciousness: he is a government official, after all. He has the right to do what he does because of the existence of the proper regulation... This featureless image of an average local official is extremely characteristic of the actual state of affairs: this man himself is not responsible—he is merely "carrying out orders". But this is not the main point. Clearly, Zhuk is using the existence of some "regulation" as an excuse, concealing his own personal interests behind it. If he does not carry out the "instructions" he has been given on time, then he might lose his official position, i. e., his identity. Putting the zone to be flooded in order without offending the present inhabitants is a delicate matter,

requiring not the coldness of an aloof functionary but personal interest and an obvious sense of concern for the needs of these people as if they were his kin.

Despite Rasputin's obvious gift in describing everyday life, displayed in his earlier works and *Farewell to Matyora* as well, the true nature of his talent and aspirations are philosophical. When we analyze the present novella, we see that the questions he poses are more philosophical than mundane.

Do we consider the land of our birth more a mother or a stepmother? As the land which brought us up and nourished us or only as the territory upon which we reside? This is precisely the question Rasputin poses here: "...I was born in Matyora. My father was born in Matyora, and so was my grandfather. This is my land." This is not the voice of someone opposed to the will of the state or to the fact that this will is to be carried out at his expense. The residents of Matyora are opposed to the scornful, alienated attitude towards their land. ("It's all the same to you whether you live here with us or somewhere else entirely.") For that self-same Zhuk, this island is not an island, but "the bed of the reservoir", and this is not land but "territory". It follows that the people are not people but "citizens to be evacuated from the territory to be flooded". Here, we are faced not simply with a tragicomic conflict between a petty official and the people, but with a clash between two types of consciousness and two different ways of perceiving the world.

Here is what is said of old Anna of *Borrowed Time* on the subject:

"...She had no particular complaints about her life. After all, how could she complain about what was her

own and no one else's—about what had happened to her and not another soul on earth?.. The reason one life is enough for a person is that because it was all you got. If you had two, you would think it not enough. The old woman had lived simply, bearing children and working, catching a few hours of sleep before the new day began, then jumping up to continue her labors, growing older almost without noticing. And all this occurred right there in the place where she had been born. She had never drifted off to some other spot, but stood firm like a tree in the forest, performing the self-same human functions her mother had. Other people travelled about, had a look at the world, and learned new ways. She listened to their tales in amazement. She herself bore children who were no worse travellers than the rest, but it never occurred to her that it might be good to wear someone else's shoes for a while so she could see more like they did or live an easier life... Moreover, she never envied anyone, no matter how successful or beautiful they were, for that would have been as strange to her as wanting somebody else's mother or somebody else's children instead of the ones she had borne. Each life was filled with a beauty all its own. She knew wonderful, priceless joys no one had ever experienced the likes of, and sorrows just as priceless which became all the more valuable and dearer with the passage of time. Without them, she would long ago have been lost in the hustle and bustle and frenetic events of life. After each blow of misfortune, she would put her weary old bones back together, douse herself with that miraculous water from Russian fairy tales which has the power to bring the dead back to life, and give herself a nudge to get going again. She had to keep on, because no one else

could live her life for her. There was no other way. Life for her was at once a joy and a torment, and she never knew where the two merged and separated or which was the best for her. She simply nurtured them both within herself for the sake of her continued existence and to feel the warmth of their secret flame...

“And suddenly it seemed that her particular life was kind and obedient, and more successful than that of anyone else she knew. There was no reason to complain that she had devoted all her days to her children, for that was why she and everyone else had come into the world—that it might never languish without people or grow old without children...”

His last short novella, published in 1985, Rasputin called *Fire*, an interesting choice for a title. Matyora is going up in flames, the bounty of nature and the creations of human hands being destroyed with equal indifference. The fire rages through the new novella in a new village, possibly the very one inhabited by the former residents of the old Matyora. In the first case, the people themselves set the fire, and neither is this possibility excluded in the second. Warehouses of valuable industrial and consumer goods, “the very biggest in the biggest lumber settlement”, which certain members of the administration had long wished to transfer to the regional center, go up in flames. The fire-fighters are amazed at how extensive the losses are. Moreover, the fire had mysteriously begun in the “best” place, and at the very time when the individuals directly responsible for the warehouses’ safety were away... It was better (for those responsible—actually irresponsible—individuals) that they were away when the fire started. There was no way of

knowing how their subordinates would have reacted to their state of preparedness in case of disaster at the crucial moment: the women were running to bring buckets of water from the Angara with traditional yokes, for they could not locate the horse-drawn water-carrier. And as far as the fire extinguishers were concerned, Ivan Petrovich, the hero of the novella, remarks bitterly: "You bang it the way you should to but all that comes is *phut!* ... *phut!* No foam, no nothing." The only fire-engine in the whole lumber station had been dismantled for spare parts two years before.

Did the author really need yet another fire when the last one was enough to scorch both him and his eager readers? Are extreme situations always necessary in literature for the full revelation of the heroes' characters, for clashes to be disclosed to the end, and for the intertwining of fates—all that which goes unnoticed under ordinary circumstances?

...Here we have a new, relatively young village in the taiga which was built for people from the "flooded territories". Here, the earth, their native land, by the efforts of those who burned Matyora, is in fact turned into nothing more than "territory". Yesterday's farmers, hunters, and fishermen have become loggers; the virgin forests of Siberia, the vast taiga, are being felled mercilessly and irresponsibly. They are literally being destroyed. "If formerly they had taken only high quality timber, only pine and larch ... now they were clearing everything to the ground." A strict plan for logging has been drawn up for which those responsible will pay with their heads if it is not fulfilled. Of course, there is also a plan for reforestation, but there are not sufficient funds or manpower to carry it out. In truth, the main point here is that

there is no enthusiasm on the part of those who are responsible for carrying out this plan too: frankly, they could not care less.

And the logging settlement itself is not a nice place to live: "Uncomfortable and untidy, it was neither a village nor a town proper, but resembled more a bivouac than anything else." Can this place be called home where people put down permanent roots, develop the land in the appropriate fashion, and work the earth with love, adapting it to their needs and improving it in keeping with their concept of beauty? "The settlement stood there, stark, defiantly open, blind and cold; seldom were soul and eye cheered by birch or rowan tree in a front garden. The very people who in their old village, the one they had left, could not have even imagined life without green under their windows, did not lay out gardens here. And the street roared and stared into the windows without a qualm."

"No land is no-man's land." This is the deeply optimistic conclusion, based on centuries of peasant morality, that Ivan Petrovich draws at the end of the novella. But the self-same Ivan Petrovich, like Heraclitus, comes to another, equally undoubtable conclusion—that fire in its advance will catch all things by surprise and judge them.

What kind of home is a place when no one sees any sense in building anything new or fixing up what has fallen into disrepair, because as soon as the timber has been felled and taken away, people have to move on, leaving cottages, sheds, kitchen gardens, and the graves of their fathers and mothers, and their own pasts behind. "If a man was to feel that his life was bearable, he must be at home on his native soil. And if there was no shelter in one place or the other, then it couldn't be found in one's personal

inner world," the main hero of the novella *Fire* concludes.

That which Rasputin foresaw in *Farewell to Matyora*, that which he protested and which tormented him turned out, to the great misfortune of all, to be quite possible. His prediction came true. Unhappily, the critics who thought this novella was "trying to squeeze tragedy from a collision which was not tragic at all" were quite wrong. This collision was tragic from the very moment of its inception: even though no lives were lost in *Farewell to Matyora*—that occurred only in *Fire*—the preconditions for this terrible event were undoubtedly present on the island which was to be flooded.

The presentiment of approaching catastrophe is present literally from the first line of the novella *Fire* in the subtlest of sensations beyond the power of reason or analysis.

Not a ghost remains of the old village: some of the local people have been forced to leave and others have joined the ranks of those who have come in search of easy money.

"A special kind of people have begun to make themselves prominent in recent years who are not wholly rejects and are not utterly lost, who in their endless migrations do not chase after money and easily spend up what money does fall due to them, but are driven as if by sectarian renunciation and an indifference to any kind of work. Such people accept no help, nor will they give it to anyone else; they simplify life's procedures for themselves, having neither family nor friends, nor attachments, and going through life the hard way, as if serving a kind of sentence. They once used to say of such a one that he had been hit by a sack in a dark corner; now it could

be said that they have withdrawn into themselves, they have taken solitude like a vow. And there is no way of finding out what makes them tick or to whom their hearts belong."

"It would be ridiculous to blame the newcomers alone. No, even your own people, the ones with whom you'd lived side by side and with whom you'd worked in one harness, even they had learned to look warily at anyone old-fashioned enough to harp about rights and appeal to conscience."

Only two or three people in the settlement try to resist the changes and preserve the morals and customs of their forebears, and they are subjected to persecution.

What had happened to people's conscientiousness? Before, honest labor had always been regarded as a sacred avocation and noble obligation, and people managed their affairs sensibly and economically. But now, in place of these admirable characteristics, we see rampant irresponsibility and sloth. Natural resources are regarded as a bottomless well which will never run dry.

One could hardly expect any good to come of this course of events imposed from without in which the people had no choice about their new mode of "existence". An invisible barrier increasingly makes its presence felt, dividing the community into two camps: the "roughnecks" and the "law-abiding citizens". Needless to say, it is the locals who refer to the newcomers, many of whom are ex-cons, as the "roughnecks", while the newcomers, in turn, dub the original inhabitants the "law-abiding citizens", especially those who attempt to cling to a more or less ethical mode of existence, retaining simple good-neighborly relations among themselves.

Naturally, the roughnecks consider Ivan Petrovich the chief and most dangerous of the law-abiding citizens.

"And Ivan Petrovich, who had often taken a vow to keep silent, trying to prove to himself that silence was also a means of action and persuasion, again and again rose up and, his voice beginning to fail him, terribly nervous and hating himself, began to talk, aware that it was to no avail." He doesn't have many supporters left, and of those few, most of them agree with him "in theory" alone, secretly fearing the base, merciless revenge of the roughnecks. This is certainly the case with Afonya Bronnikov, who considers it sufficient to live and work honestly, not to lie or steal. He believes in educating others by personal example, so to say: "He who has eyes, let him see."

The head of the felling site, Boris Timofeyevich, is a "strong man" who can lose his temper and chew out some totally innocent individual or praise someone who does not deserve it but who knows quite well "what's what and who's who", and thanks to whom production somehow keeps plodding along and discipline does not disintegrate totally in the felling area. However, it is obvious that all is far from well in the area for which he is responsible. It has already reached the point that the morning after pay-day, Boris Timofeyevich covertly takes his "wildcat brigade" of lumberjacks a couple of bottles of booze as a "present" to keep them from deserting outright.

Thus, almost unnoticed, compromise becomes the norm; the kindness and century-old traditions based on personal integrity, the original inhabitants' attempt to cling to them gradually recede. "The world doesn't change suddenly, in one go. It all happens the way it was with us," reflects the hero, Ivan Petrovich. "What was once unacceptable is now considered the norm.

What was once forbidden is now allowed. What was a disgrace and mortal sin is now a clever sleight of hand. How long will we keep on giving up that which has supported us from time immemorial? From what reserves will the desired assistance appear?"

The warehouses are burning, and with them, the supply of grain. But what is the first thing the seasonal workers try to save? Cases of vodka which they break open and begin to consume on the spot. But here, in the midst of the general confusion and panic, it is possible to make off with something a great deal more substantial—and heaven help anyone who tries to stand in the way!

One person who does not waver in his convictions to the bitter end is Uncle Misha Khampo, a born watchman, and a watchman by conviction, the basis of which is the wise adage tested by centuries of peasant life, "Don't touch anything that doesn't belong to you." Unfortunately, his unwavering certainty in the correctness of his ideals runs up against a latent cruelty just as indestructible and expressed by the conviction that "anything goes" and the principle ~~that~~, "anything I can lay my hands on is mine for the taking". This collision leads to the death of Uncle Misha, a loyal and infinitely kind old man.

It often happens that malicious, brazen individuals who live in constant fear of exposure and punishment band together around a "strong" leader who draws them into a poised fist so they can "stand up for themselves". This is what the roughnecks of *Fire* do:

"People coming into contact with a kind of invisible togetherness linked by the worst, not the best in man, were dismayed and tried to keep as far away from the roughnecks as possible. There were hundreds of inhabitants in the settlement, but a dozen had

seized power, and that was what Ivan Petrovich couldn't understand."

The "local people" do not just try to stay as far away as possible and to ignore the disgraceful behavior and lawlessness of these people, but some of them go over to the side of the newcomers. After all, as the saying goes, one bad apple can spoil the whole bunch. When they are looking into the base pranks pulled behind the backs of those who attempt to stand in the way of the roughnecks, Ivan Petrovich and his followers come to this sad conclusion: that some of their own people are involved in the goings on.

Therefore, the moral exhaustion and inner confusion of those few remaining souls who are trying with their last strength to overcome the rest and save the village and its good name is quite understandable!..

"Ivan Petrovich felt a terrible devastation inside, as if an alien army had passed by in him, trampling on and befouling everything, leaving behind acrid smoke, fused shards and the shapeless, sharp pieces of what had once been a settled life." He already felt as if he were doing time every day when he set off for work. He was driven to the point of seeking a place under the sun that was a bit calmer and quieter. Ivan Petrovich had already decided to set off for the Far East to live with his son..."

Perhaps the most terrible and frightening thing of all about the fire scenes is that this great misfortune for the settlement is transformed into a real holiday for the young bucks who arrive from neighboring villages to help put it out. They work harder than they ever have in their lives here—merrily and with inspiration—as if they have finally found a job that is to their liking. Their efforts verge on the heroic, but unfortunately, they are so drunk, they must practi-

cally be saved from the flames themselves... Have a look at this spectacle: a feast in the midst of a plague, no more no less! But wait a minute—after all, we have seen this feast before. Remember the arson squad of *Farewell to Matyora* and the man who burns his own house and eagerly waits to receive the insurance money for it?

The present fire began on the island invented by Rasputin; the previous events could lead only to the terrible denouement which occurs in the new novella. For such are the inexorable laws of tragedy, both in life and in art...

“What can we do after this? What are we going to do?” asks the main hero of the novella of one of the few villagers who has not yet left. Ivan Petrovich seems to have forgotten his firm decision to go and live with his son in the Far East. “We’ll just keep on living, no matter how difficult that may be. We’ll survive somehow,” is the reply he hears. These are the words he has already said to himself. This is the ray of light and hope with which the author leaves us. And despite the mighty billows of thick smoke and resulting tears flowing from everyone’s eyes, we see this ray of light and place our hopes on it: as long as even one of these people remains in the new settlement, Matyora will live on...

It would require a substantial stretch of the imagination, however, to consider this novella mere journalism as some critics have claimed, for *Fire* is genuinely a work of literature containing the psychological depth, skilful composition, and broad sweep of imagination characteristic of the writer. Like any work of literature, it is not bound by any concrete event, by any geographical or temporal framework... We are dealing not with events but with a phenomenon. We meet

not an actual individual named Ivan Petrovich residing in a small village on the Angara River who could be visited and interviewed at our discretion. Rather we meet a generalized image of a person, a former tiller of the soil who, due to circumstances beyond his control, has been transformed into a worker.

The author shows the tense social atmosphere in which our hero finds himself as well as his inner world and spiritual state in the face of situations to which he is not at all accustomed. True, the writer paints the picture in black and white without resorting to metaphors or euphemisms, appealing for an immediate reaction on the part of like-minded readers. The writer acts in the same fashion as his unaccommodating hero: "...Unable to keep quiet and sure to have given himself hell if he had kept quiet, he got up at the meeting and denounced everything that was happening on the felling site, in the lower warehouse, in the garage and in the shops. He spoke about what everybody knew and what had gradually been becoming a custom..."

If this is indeed publicistic writing, then it is not so utilitarian as it might seem at first glance. Such a writer as Rasputin could not limit the situation to purely managerial or interdepartmental problems. In *Fire*, as in all his previous works, he is interested first and foremost in the moral and ethical collisions of contemporaneity, the state and staunchness of his characters and turning points in their lives.

How could he fail to take note of such an alarming symptom, to put it mildly, when notions of "good" or "bad" in reference to a person are considered "obsolete words that have survived in the language as a memory of grandfathers' times" ... when, "with life as it is lived today, the good man is one who does no

evil, never intervenes without being asked, and does not prevent anything. The measure of a good man is not his inclination to the good, but a chosen and comfortable position between good and evil, a constant and balanced temperature of the soul."

The author poses not a few similar moral problems in *Fire* so he can use the force of his talent to alarm and disturb the souls of his readers. The writer's creative "self" in the most direct sense possible is transformed into his civic "self" which is greatly concerned for the future of his homeland.

Such works as *Fire* appear in accordance with the dictates of the times, but in a sense, they also dictate to the future what form to take. Therefore, the words with which critic Vadim Sokolov ends his article in *Literaturnaya gazeta* (1985, No. 38) are fully comprehensible and justifiable: "This novella appeared at exactly the right time! It demonstrates simply and convincingly that the shortest path to the ever-renewing truth of art ... is a major social thought expressed fully, without any reservations."

When critic Vadim Baranov speaks in his article "The Formula for Creativity"¹ of the prototypes for Rasputin's images, he notes: "I do not think it necessary to prove that his images are in any sense merely 'photographic'." It is very easy to agree with this observation, the more so since it was made by a serious critic about a serious writer. "Photographic" imagery obviously has its place in sketches and the like. But here, it is fascinating to observe the extent to which the writer's imagination is somehow more true to life than life itself. Invented heroes and situa-

¹*Literaturnoye obozrenie*, No. 12, 18 September 1975.

tions seem more real than actual people and events. It is impossible to conceive of a writer who is totally lacking in imagination. On the other hand, of course, even the most vivid of imaginations must be tempered by life experience and the realities of the surrounding world. Only then will Nikolai Gogol's famed Nose from the novella of the same name, which leaves its owner's face and becomes a personage in its own right, be perceived as a living individual and not some idle surrealistic invention.

Yugoslav writer Ciril Kosmac has produced a rather interesting and curious work: "Ballad of the Pipe and the Cloud". The subject of this piece is creativity as such, its peculiarities and enigmas. A certain writer goes to the village to complete a work about the Second World War. The hero of his novella, an old peasant, sacrifices his life to save wounded partisans. This character is sheer invention on the part of the author. Moreover, thanks to the skill of Kosmač, we observe the process of the invention of this character. We see the procession of thoughts flowing through the writer's mind and get a glimpse of the imagination in the act of its creation. While he is working, the writer avoids associating with his talkative hosts and the countless neighbors that drop by. We can imagine his amazement when he learns that the exact situation he has invented actually occurred in the very village he is visiting, and that his hosts are the persons concerned. An invented situation suddenly becomes reality: long ago, during the war, the master of the house found himself in a similar situation, but could not muster up the courage at the time to perform the feat executed by the old man in the writer's story. Thus the writer's imagination, based on life experience, inevitably serves realism, first and

foremost, no matter what whimsical forms it may seem to take at first glance.

Of course, it is interesting to know that the prototype for old Anna of *Borrowed Time* was Rasputin's grandmother, Maria Gerasimovna. Could it possibly be that the writer remembered so accurately and in such great detail her vivid and highly original language? The very situation in the novella, the internal monologues, and behavior of old Anna are doubtless pure invention on the part of Rasputin. But still, did he distort the image of his grandmother in any way? Not in the least, I am sure. However, it is not Maria Gerasimovna who comes across to the reader, but Anna, the generalized image of an old Russian woman who remembers what it was like "before the Revolution", who has lived through three wars and lost three sons in battle, and who has selflessly given her all to her family. In devoting herself totally to her children, she has given herself to society and her country. Therefore, this image is so important to the writer and so dear to the reader. Because the writer's fantasy is based on reality, we see in old Anna not an invention, but a real person.

The image of Andrei Guskov in *Live and Remember* is even more illustrative in this case. Rasputin had no prototype for this character in the ordinary sense, for we cannot count the mere fact that he may have caught a glimpse of a deserter being arrested when he was a child. But neither is his hero someone from another epoch, a mere product of the author's imagination. This man lived in some Siberian village, went to school, worked, and hunted; he read the same books as his peers and joined the young Pioneer Organization along with all the rest of his schoolmates. We have no reason to think he did not love his country.

That means Rasputin knew this man as well and lived side by side with him, although the author was a bit younger. The main thing is not that Guskov deserted under these specific conditions. Today, for example, such a man as he might abandon a geological expedition, leaving his companions deep in the taiga without a radio or any supplies. The writer examines the nature of desertion in general, the degradation of the human character, the degeneration of the person.

He creates this image from the minutest psychological details. Because every detail is precise and true-to-life, and since every change in the hero's character is motivated and tested by logic, we see Guskov as a real person.

But imagination can work in various directions, even in the case of such a realistic, integrated writer as Rasputin. In his early short story, "Rudolfio", he invented a couple so standardized they could be inserted, without the slightest alteration, into any tale about young people, not just a Russian one.

In "Rudolfio", he created, or attempted to create, a story of first love. But since the heroes of the story are old enough to be responsible for their actions, and chiefly because the situation is sufficiently banal, Rasputin (it seems to us) should have refrained from the use of poetic metaphor with which the story is filled, and resorted to psychological characterizations to convince us of the reality and genuineness of his heroes. However, the writer has betrayed himself in this story by presenting a mere scheme, an outline, and asking us to accept it as real life. His fantasy strayed too far from actual existence, and therefore, his artistic images are not true to life.

While Rasputin sticks to realistic psychological prose in all his novellas, in his short stories, he experi-

ments with other forms. We have already examined one such unsuccessful attempt. Another short story, "A Bearskin for Sale", comes to mind. Here, his imagination functions on an abstract level, and the personages he describes are mere mannequins called forth to illustrate the given idea.

The development of literature over time demonstrates that the didactic tale (or even the didactic novel) can be just as forceful as other genres. But in similar works, the lack or insufficient quantity of psychological characterizations must be compensated for by the depth and importance of the ideas, themes, and schematization of the heroes—by the vital importance of the problems presented. However, Rasputin fails to achieve that sort of balance here. The means of expression chosen are not appropriate to the ideas expressed.

The writer's later short stories from the cycle *Live and Love* which he published at the beginning of the '80s are another matter entirely. They cannot be compared with anything else he has written up till now.

Even a passing acquaintance with Rasputin's environment, way of life, and passions gives us the opportunity, based on these new stories, to attempt to explicate the interrelation between what is real and what has been invented—or not actually invented, but drawn from the practically irrational. Thus, in the title story, the prototype of Mityai, one of the main characters, seems, from all indications, to be a friend of Rasputin's, a fellow writer who lives but a stone's throw away on Lake Baikal. Many features of his character are evident: the harmless bragging without thought of personal gain, the great-heartedness, the willingness to respond to the needs of one's neigh-

bor, and his profound understanding of the taiga and man's place in it. We also recognize the local train our heroes take when they go berry picking: of course, it is the "express" train that makes a run from the Baikal Port to Slyudyanka (a little over a hundred kilometers), chugging along for almost half the day, stopping not just at every depot but at every berry patch as well. We even recognize the grief aroused in the story's hero by the sight of the deserted houses along the way. After all, they were built solidly to last for centuries. Each one is a living word in the history of wooden architecture. Till this day, anyone who has the energy moves such a house piece by piece to the Baikal Port, Listvyanka, or Kultuk and reassembles it there to grace the area with its rustic charm and beauty. And if we add to this the fact that these escheated houses stand on the most picturesque sites of Lake Baikal, the pulchritude of which is simply incomparable, the confusion of the story's hero, the teenager Sanya, who is seeing such ghost villages for the first time, will be more comprehensible to us: "...Until the last of the abandoned houses disappeared from view, Sanya had the strangest feeling that he was looking at a burial ground from within, and that somewhere on the other side, over the houses, as over graves, stood tombstones, as was meet and right."

We can be fairly certain that the lyrical hero of "What to Tell the Raven?" is the author himself, and not just because it is written in the first person. The main thing is that we see in this hero features of Rasputin's character—the almost morbid dissatisfaction with himself resulting in a lack of self-assurance; the habit of incessant reflection; the eagerness to understand his interlocutor's point of view; and the unhurried manner with which he comes to any conclusions,

especially when they have to do with the fate of a human being. The author does not conceal the fact that the hero of this story is a writer. Moreover, Rasputin's small daughter is about the same age as the heroine of this tale and is similar in other respects as well. Then there is the little cottage on Lake Baikal. But it would be strange if a writer of such stature were to limit himself to but a copy of nature, albeit a vivid one.

The fifteen-year-old Sanya in the story "Live and Love" decides one fine day with the categorical, direct attitude typical of young people, that he is going to be "independent". "To anyone who doesn't have it, independence seems so attractive and exciting that it is worth paying for at any price." "I've had enough of going where I'm told, doing what other people instruct me to do, and believing in all sorts of fairy tales..." But the events that follow are in fact like something straight out of a fairy tale: his parents leave on a trip and send him to stay with his grandmother on Lake Baikal. Then his grandmother unexpectedly receives a telegram that her daughter is ill and sets off to take care of her grandchildren... Sanya unexpectedly receives the freedom he so longed for and the opportunity to carry out whatever decisions he makes for himself.

The attempt to discover, comprehend, and reflect upon the secrets in the lives of teenagers is in the tradition of the finest works of literature produced throughout the ages. The cognition of man's inner world, the formation and maturation of character and finding one's place in the world are all invariably connected with the comprehension of the material world, the discovery of this world for oneself and the determination of man's approach to nature and his role in

history, as well as his complete and universal understanding of the meaning of these concepts.

Sanya does not set off for some desert island or distant land, as do many of his fortunate literary peers. All he does is take a trip on the plodding train and walk on his own two feet with Mityai and Uncle Volodya, his neighbor, in the taiga near Lake Baikal. The journey lasts only two days and a night. But his reason and intuition are tuned for reflection and perception of the norms and interrelations of existence, in a manner which can be enabled in the youthful soul and mind only by intercourse with nature. Indeed, the secrets and greatness of nature in all its primeval majesty are revealed to him in such bountiful measure that these two days might well be the decisive ones in terms of the rest of his life.

"It could not possibly be ... that a person begins each new day of his life blindly, not knowing what is going to happen to him, living till the end of the day solely by the decision of his own will, every moment choosing what to do and where to go. Somehow, that was not like a human being. Might it not be the case that within each individual lay his entire life from beginning to end and the memory of what to do? Perhaps some people made use of this memory while others did not, or maybe they resisted it. All of life was but the recollection of what was innate in a person from the moment of his birth. Otherwise, what was the sense of letting one come into the world? A world so perfect it amazed Sanya more and more. Yet within that amazement was some kernel of close and clear incomprehensibility. The world was so complete in its forms and potential in comparison with the rest of the universe that man could not possibly be running hither and thither along some open

road, going wherever the wind happened to blow him. That was simply out of the question!..”

Obviously, these are the reflections of a mind which has not yet reached maturity, and perhaps therein lies their value—that they are thus far unclouded by literary or philosophical experience which is derivative or even alien to the thinker. Here, the boy’s thoughts are forging their first path. He attempts to define whatever he comes in contact with and to understand and determine it for himself. But not everything in nature can be broken down into atoms, and not all paths can be marked definitively—and this is quite fortunate, for otherwise, there would be no food for thought. “This day had been too great, too unsubjugated by anything, and too important and glorious for categorization, for any conclusions to be drawn from it. The day could only be felt, sensed, and listened to—no more. The sensation of inexplicability it evoked only confirmed its infinite incomprehensibility.”

The inexplicability of one’s feelings... The capacity for being overwhelmed... What fine moments we experience when we are overcome by these sensations! And thank goodness this experience is not limited to one’s youth! The confirmation of this is found in Rasputin’s story “What to Tell the Raven?” Its hero is divided and confused; he feels guilty because he hurt and disappointed his five-year-old daughter, suddenly leaving for the country, the unfinished manuscript awaiting him with reproach on the desk. But most of all, he is befuddled because he can’t figure out what is happening to him. He cannot comprehend how he moves about in space and seems to be in two places at once. Anyone can recall such an inner mood, or more precisely, such a state:

nothing is going right, and he alone is responsible for all that is going wrong. He just can't seem to get his act together and calm down. Every step he takes throws him even more off balance and puts him even farther from normal existence.

Perhaps the state of mind of Rasputin's hero could be explained by some illness as close associates of another literary figure tried to do in Anton Chekhov's story, "The Black Monk". The explanation was offered, and an attempt was made to cure the patient, depriving him of all that gave his life meaning and sense. The world that remained to him now had none of flavor left in it, was disciplined and sterilized, completely safe, and totally uninteresting. "How fortunate Buddha, Mohammed, and Shakespeare were," Chekhov exclaims via the vehicle of his hero, "that well-meaning relations and doctors did not cure them of ecstasy and inspiration! If Mohammed had taken bromate for his nerves, worked only two hours a day, and drunk milk, he would have had as much impact on the world as his dog. The end result of the deeds of all these doctors and well-meaning relatives will be that humanity will become duller. Then mediocrity will be considered genius, and civilization will perish."

The descriptions of nature in Rasputin's stories are transformed unnoticed and unintentionally into descriptions of man's inner state, for the two are inevitably interconnected and mutually dependent upon each other.

"...Lake Baikal gradually grew calmer. Here and there, low waves shimmered and died down before reaching the shore. The air blinded the eye with some cloudy flickers of dim sunshine; it could not be said that the sun was in one particular place, for it seemed to have melted over the entire whitish sky with deflat-

ed clouds hanging low, and it shone from all directions. The morning chill had already passed, but there had not yet been time for the day to warm up. Moreover, it didn't seem as if the day was planning to get any warmer, but rather was busy with some other, more important changes. It was neither chilly nor particularly warm, neither sunny nor overcast, but somewhere in between, so the atmosphere was altogether indefinite and somewhat oppressive...

"...It was not given me to understand whose force, whose power it was—that of the firmament over the waters or the waters over the heavens. But it was perfectly obvious that they were locked in some living and divine subordination to each other. Nor could I fathom the divine purpose in what I saw. Which element controlled the heights, and which the depths, I could not say. Where was the boundary between them? In which of these expanses, equal in size and authority, lay the secret of the world in which we found ourselves, so simple, yet so inaccessible to us?

"Of course, these queries were in vain. Not only were they impossible to answer—they were impossible to ask. There is a limit one must not exceed in posing questions...

"I endeavored to comprehend these matters a while longer, and to listen, but more and more, my faculties of consciousness, feeling, sight, and hearing flickered pleasantly within me, being distilled into some all-encompassing fount of emotion. Everything within me grew quieter, then calmer and calmer. I was not aware of myself in any way, and all internal motions divorced themselves from me, but I continued to observe everything taking place around me for a considerable distance. However, I could do no more than that. It was as if I had been engulfed by and

become one with that all-encompassing fount of emotion that surrounded me..."

The writer penetrates so deeply the psychological state of nature and man that the subtlest of nuances are at his command, elevating his prose to the verge of the unfathomable. The spirit of nature and the human soul unite miraculously to transform the life of the hero. Prose which touches upon the highest truths, Rasputin repeats time and again, "cannot be fathomed. Nor is it necessary, for what can be comprehended soon becomes unneeded and dies." After achieving the maximum level of mental and emotional content when every word becomes familiar and a metaphor, prose has no choice but to resort to poetry.

Prose becomes poetry, and poetry is inexplicable and needs no explanation. "The more people try to explain art by scientific means, the more mysterious and inexplicable these means will seem," confirms Alexander Blok in one of his articles. "...Art cannot be comprehended by scientific methods, for art and science are quite different in essence, merging only on the surface."

The story "What to Tell the Raven?" is one of the rare instances when the writer addresses his reader without an intermediary, allowing him a closer look at the mysterious inner workings of his art. The main secret here is that the joys and sufferings of the literary hero and the author are one and the same: when the hero's world is shattered, the author's heart breaks as well. This openness, this placing of absolute trust in the reader, baring one's soul, if you will, are also the privilege of the poet.

Merging with nature and the world. The merging of spirits. At the end of this story, Rasputin seems to

give us the key to the interpretation of the complexities of the world and human emotions.

In the cycle *Live and Love*, Rasputin sees right through his characters, revealing the inner depths of their psychologies, and this marks a new level in his mastery, quite in keeping with the finest traditions of Russian literature.

Critics have noted that the subject and situation described in *Borrowed Time* are far from new. However, this can hardly be taken as a reproach aimed at Rasputin, for throughout the history of literature, certain subjects have recurred time and again. The epoch and geographic location as well as the heroes change. And in addition each author has his own way of looking at the world and philosophy of life, as well as his own particular means of expression...

The extent to which the writer in this novella has penetrated the area which is closest to us and the most mysterious and least explored—the land which is known as the inner world of the person—is truly remarkable.

“Calmly the old lady made ready, without fear or panic. Softly she pushed back the covers from her breast, so as to make it easier to get started. Then she gingerly, noiselessly, rocked herself slightly, and found that she was carrying no extra weight. It had all gone. She had time for a fleeting moment of wonder at the fact that she was weightless, and at how easy it was to move her body, as if it was in thin air. Her body was still here with her, and she could feel her heart deceptively sending out its pulses...

“Her eyes were still open and still held the deathly-pale nocturnal light—the last thing she would see. If that light came over everything that her eyes had

seen before, it would be easier to accept the darkness from above. She suddenly felt cold and frightened at the thought that, having lived for nearly eighty years and always with time in hand, she was now hanging by a thread. At this moment she no longer had any future left, only a past. All her life was now in one piece, and in a few moments she would have neither future nor past. When she was gone, her children would be left in the world, but she herself would have nothing and nobody, not even herself. Where would her life go? she wondered. After all, she could remember living only a little while ago. Who would receive the life she had brought to an end, like a piece of work—perhaps done well, perhaps not, but brought to an end?..

“Somebody might mention her kindly, nod in her direction, and that would be all. The memory of her would grow dim, and they’d stop mentioning her altogether. That was a fact. What else did she want? She would have liked to know why and for what purpose she had lived, trodden this earth in a fever of activity, carrying the heaviest of burdens on her back. Why? Only for her own sake, or for some other purpose as well? Who had needed her for anything serious, as for any amusement? And was it good or bad that she was leaving other lives behind her? Who could say? Who could enlighten her? Why?..

“In the farthest corner of the room she heard a creaking sound, like a garbled, indistinct answer to her question, and she waited, breathless: that must be for her.”

It is difficult to point to any particular writers Rasputin has taken as his teachers and mentors with the exception of 19th century Russian prose in gene-

ral, and it has long served as an example for the authors of many countries the world over. We have already mentioned Rasputin's ability to depict the subtlest nuances of feeling in his heroes, and to depict them penetratingly and scrupulously. Of course, it is not hard for us to trace the genealogy of his creative method and see that his chief mentor was Dostoyevsky. Undoubtedly, the enormous influence the writing and person of Fyodor Dostoyevsky has had on the literature and art of our century is so vast it defies analysis. But we must not forget that more than a hundred years have passed since the appearance of *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. We must keep them in mind and remember that these great works were also influenced by the writing which preceded them.

A contemporary master of prose must know the history of Russian literature, and it is impossible for him or her to remain totally unaffected in reason and spirit by this knowledge... The finest passages of *Live and Remember* remind me increasingly of none other than Dostoyevsky. Perhaps this centrifugal motion is unconscious, or maybe the material and character of the author's talent force him to travel precisely this path. Incidentally, I refer here least of all to any superficial similarity of expression or common literary techniques such as style, language, or composition. It is precisely in penetration into the psychology of the human being in the finest passages of *Live and Remember* that Rasputin approaches Dostoyevsky in mastery, direction, and force of talent.

I am not referring here to any literal similarities or even to the subordination of the talent of one to the other, but rather to the presence of the subtlest feelings which motivate human actions, to the origination

and development of mood and spiritual state. Rasputin treats these matters with almost as much unimaginable depth and with equal seriousness and baring of his soul as did the author of *The Brothers Karamazov* in his time.

...He pays infinite attention to the observation of the slightest details of the human psyche. The tormented Nastyona is caught in the middle of an impossible situation. She senses, or possibly imagines, the suspicions of her fellow-villagers, yet she repeatedly does things to raise increasing doubts in the mind of the sly and clever Innokenty Ivanovich, who is most dangerous for her in her present position. "...Something compelled Nastyona, almost against her will, to go precisely to him. He loved poking his nose into other people's business, and he had a nose like a hawk. He was forever finding out things by hook or crook that no one else even suspected as yet." This scene involuntarily brings to mind Raskolnikov and his risky game with Porfiry, and his visiting the apartment of the old woman money-lender after her murder.

These two authors, Rasputin and Dostoyevsky, have yet another point in common: the exceptional nature of the situations in which their heroes find themselves. Rasputin invariably places his heroes in crisis situations or chooses the exceptional moment when their lives reach a culmination, better to reveal spiritual and moral resources which might remain unnoticed under ordinary circumstances.

When we read in *Borrowed Time* of the death-bed reflections and gamut of emotions experienced by old Anna, we feel ourselves standing, along with the author, at the very edge of an infinite abyss. One false step, and no amount of good intentions will save us. We are all inexorably drawn toward that abyss, and

our heads start spinning. We all want to make that final step...

But Rasputin is well aware of this danger. His talent as a writer does not allow him to go over the edge. He mentions this problem himself in his next work in chronological order, *Up and Down the River*. It even seems he is revealing some of the secrets of his work on *Borrowed Time*.

The hero of the story *Up and Down the River*, the young writer Viktor, on a rare visit home, recollects the story about the death of an old man published in his most recent book. Like every inexperienced, and therefore, bold writer, Viktor "attempts to transcend the boundary which separates one state from the other"—i. e., life from death.

Viktor's boldness and extremism are tempered by the author's sense of caution and measure. Is experience which shuns daring worth very much? This question seems both appropriate and unavoidable. However, the answer is quite complex.

To limit oneself consciously requires courage and a sober recognition of one's possibilities based on the creative skill of past masters' experience. The main thing is not even this, but that self-discipline is an important sign of a writer's maturity.

Viktor's reflections are filled with shame at his thoughtless impertinence and a bitter admission of his failure. The old man, who appears to him in a dream, says with a sad smile: "I don't understand why you think you have to write about something you cannot possibly know anything about. For what you attempted to write about is totally unlike anything you have ever experienced. It is far greater and more significant, far more unbelievable than anything your feeble imagination can possibly comprehend... And not only

that, but your words are totally unsuitable for such a thing. They are too petty, too short... You can't even write decently about something ordinary and human, and here you are trying to fathom one of the profoundest mysteries of the universe! The nerve of you! The most you can do is talk around it—you can never name it outright...”

Only insignificant, chance figures in literature have been pleased with what they have written. Real writers have always been tormented by their inability to perfect their means of expression. There is nothing strange about the fact that the words of the old man from Rasputin's story are so close to those of an anthropomorphic Satan in a novel by Russian writer Leonid Andreyev entitled *Satan's Diary*: “...To express a petty and ordinary thought about the inadequacies of their (people's—*N. K.*) words and logic, I was forced to waste a great deal of good paper... So what would be required to express something large and unusual? I can tell you already that the unusual is quite inexpressible in the language of your mutterings...” Satan's maxim here is of course the *cri de coeur* of Andreyev himself, for in 1921, the journal *Kultura teatra* wrote of him: “Andreyev's incessant attempts to express the inexpressible surely excite the reader. In this sense, the best passages of *Satan's Diary* are not those where he touches upon politics, but the ones where he beats blindly at some shroud, attempting to speak of the innermost mysteries...”

“Unusual ... inexpressible...” Nonetheless, we know that quantitative changes in language occur rather slowly, and that the vocabulary of Pushkin, who wrote in the first half of the 19th century, differs very little from the vocabulary of contemporary

literature. But the axiomatic individuality of style and dissimilarity of the language of all genuine writers from the others is remarkable. The same thing happens here as in other forms of creativity: having exactly the same paints at their disposal, two talented artists will come up with totally different color gamuts. Using an equal and unalterable number of sounds, two talented composers will write extremely different works of music which could never be confused with each other. Even if they use exactly the same theme, two masters will create fundamentally different works.

A talented writer creates his own linguistic universe, his own unique style. This occurs spontaneously and inevitably: "For me, writing is like breathing..." In the 1950s and 1960s, several volumes by Russian writer Andrei Platonov (1899-1951) were published one after the other. This series literally revealed to the reader the unique worldview and style of the lyrical, epic and satirical prose of this writer. In reading Platonov, it is quite evident that he continues the literary traditions of Lev Tolstoy and shares some spiritual kinship with that author. But there is an essential difference between them which consists in their attitudes toward the use of words.

Andrei Platonov's excessive attention to the particular words he used was perceived by many of his own generation as mere formalism designed to over-emphasize the unusualness of his phrases. In any creative process, there is necessarily an element of rationalism: the construction of the subject, composition of the work, and selection of material must all be determined according to some logical scheme. The same applies to the choice of the actual words themselves: both study of the vocabulary and collection of local

speech patterns, dialect or slang expressions, and even the selection of words for a particular phrase. All these elements cannot simply be based on the intuition of the author. Surely the rhymed prose of Russian writer and poet Andrei Bely, so praised by Maxim Gorky, is less a matter of sheer inspiration on the part of the poet than of cold calculation. Style and creative manner are subject to change and evolution. Great American author William Faulkner sought a new solution for every successive work, while retaining the basic foundations and hallmarks of his highly original style. Therefore, it is not surprising that Faulkner is one of Rasputin's favorite authors. After all, the perspicacious and controversial American was just as devoted to the residents of the mythical Yoknapatawpha County of his native Mississippi as Rasputin is to his beloved Siberian peasants.

Rasputin is very strict in his use of language and is even more reserved and "realistic" in his search for the most voluminous word than Platonov was in his day, revealing that the roots of his language and style are closer to the 19th century than the present one.

Despite the multitude of panegyrical articles about Rasputin, not everyone accepts him without reservations. But I have never seen him criticized by anyone for a careless attitude toward the use of language. (The exception, of course, is that he is occasionally accused of overuse of dialect.) While remaining true to the Russian prose of the last century, Rasputin has doubtless kept pace with the finest masters of the present century. "The delight of deviating from the norm," of which Academician Leonid Scherba spoke, is as true of Rasputin as it is of any talented artist. Doubtless, the search for the most voluminous and appropriate word is necessary, because it is not the

phrase which is subordinate to the word, but the opposite: the word is what gives the phrase its meaning.

Having determined the general direction his creative efforts should take, Rasputin produces increasingly skilful, ever more subtle works, while at the same time becoming more natural and expanding the boldness of his abilities, gradually letting us get accustomed to his particular use of the language.

Over a decade of hard work and reflection on Rasputin's part has passed since "Vasily and Vasilissa" came out, and he has published six novellas and several brilliant short stories. Fame has been accompanied by the inevitable distractions: meetings and speeches, interview-seekers besieging the author in Irkutsk and seeking him out on his visits to Moscow. Rasputin speaks of his work rarely and reluctantly—he wrote of it only in the novella *Up and Down the River*. Nonetheless, even the taciturn Rasputin cannot withstand the onslaughts of Moscow's journalists. Occasional interviews do appear, but the strained interpretations, if not outright fictions of the over-eager correspondents are immediately apparent. I know the author is greatly distressed by such publications... When critics grossly misinterpret his works, he is occasionally forced to comment upon them, and then we find sincerity and genuine interest in his replies to journalists' questions. The main thing we see at such moments is that Rasputin is laconic as a rule not out of reticence.

Here is the conclusion of an interview given to a correspondent from the journal *Voprosy literatury* (No. 9, 1979). The correspondent asked, not without a vague hint: "What is your reaction to the arguments about language which flare up from time to time?"

We must note here that especially after the publication of *Borrowed Time*, Rasputin was frequently accused of over-use or misuse of local jargon and dialect. "I think discussions of the interrelationship of literary and conversational Russian are merely speculative to a certain extent," replied Rasputin. "First and foremost, language must be precise... A writer can't learn to express himself at a university... Without making any special appeal for the use of dialect in writing, nonetheless, I have at my command the full gamut of spoken Russian, both standard and non-standard... Siberian dialects are quite remarkable in that people from the various gubernias of old Russia were constantly migrating to the far side of the Urals. Even now, people come to Siberia from all parts of the country. And they bring with them not just their baggage, but all the richness of expression of their native regions. So Siberia has as much wealth to offer linguistically as she does materially, in gold and diamonds."

The disputes about the use of dialects in literature die down then flare up again with fresh force and have already become a more or less permanent feature of literary criticism in this country. The recurrent nature of this issue is perfectly understandable when we consider that our language is increasingly impoverished as we forget its etymology and sources, not only in terms of the speech of simple people, but in a purely literary sense. We increasingly clutter our language by "enriching" it with fast-changing urban jargon and slang, because they are "universal".

The extent to which dialect and slang are used in literature is dictated by the taste of the particular writer, by his "feel for the language" and cultural level. But all these intuitions must be filtered through a sense of civic responsibility in the face of the past and

present for the preservation of the "great might..." of the Russian tongue, as Turgenev noted.

Rasputin is reserved and cautious in his search for new means of expression: he often uses words which are obsolete, from some dialect, or interesting coinages. These terms interact with and supplement many ordinary words. Thus the two categories act together to enrich the language. Every word is appropriate, and each betrays the love of the author for his native language and the painstaking care he has taken to see that everything is in place: a Herculean task which is so well done, it is not noticeable at first glance...

In the novella *Fire*, Rasputin made free and unfettered use of dialectical speech which illuminated the exactitude and individuality of his writing. He frequently makes neologisms of the dialectical words which are an invariable part of his style, and they enliven the text in an unaffected fashion because they are neither pedantic nor the evasions of an indolent mind eager to defy the accepted canons of writing.

With the publication of *Borrowed Time*, Rasputin achieved an enviable mastery of presenting dialog naturally, in a totally unaffected fashion, while in linguistic personification (in *Money for Maria*, for example) he is still rather reserved, remaining at an "average" level in terms of language. The vivid, unfettered manner of speaking of Rasputin's old women, which is in no way forced or stylized, can easily be distinguished from the slightly standardized—due to the effect of newspapers, radio, and the army—speech of Mikhail, as it can from the "correct", "citified" speech of Liusia. It takes the author only a few expressions to create the guileless image of Ilia in *Borrowed Time*.

The best indicator of Rasputin's mastery of dialog is

his ability to create humor aplenty, despite the seriousness of the matter under consideration or the tragic situation at hand. This is true of all his novellas. Each character has his own particular brand of humor in keeping with his intellect, education, and sense of culture. Moreover, this sense of humor is always in keeping with the hero's particular personality.

"...Everyone probably has his own technique in writing," Rasputin said in one of his rare interviews. "I make no preliminary preparations, as a rule. I don't even have any plan laid out in advance. The only thing I do when I get down to work is to invent a vocabulary for each character. I try to differentiate between the language used by every hero. I write in chapters—and by the way, I never have any idea of what will be in the next one any more than I know in detail what will happen on the morrow..."

The author refers here to his present method of writing, but I am sure that when he was working on *Money for Maria*, he made preliminary plans and worked out the composition ahead of time. The best proof that this was the case is the alternating of chapters where the action occurs in the present with chapters consisting of flashbacks. However, the very next novella in chronological sequence, *Borrowed Time*, is constructed in an entirely different fashion. The information is collected and presented like a mosaic: that which is important for the creation of a general impression, for the mood and overall picture, does not seem to be placed in any particular order in terms of chronology or location of action. But nonetheless, the main image, old Anna, remain the focal point of the novella and the reason it was written. All the other images are in some measure subordinate to this one. Even those chapters in which she plays no

direct part are still about her, including Liusia's walk in the forest and the various conversations among the brothers and sisters. The story "Vasily and Vasilissa" was constructed in approximately the same fashion. In the novella *Fire*, the unexpected misfortune and the rapidity with which it grows into a real disaster, as well as the fast-approaching climax dictate a special form of narrative: short, chopped phrases, chapters only half a page long scattered among those which are more "traditional" for Rasputin in their unhurried, long-winded style, fully in keeping with the slow, measured pace of village life. A good example of this is the episode when the hero Ivan Petrovich reminisces about how satisfying and happy his former way of life was...

There is another interesting point here: we have spoken of Rasputin's closeness to Dostoyevsky in that they both chose to depict extreme crisis situations. But here, all similarity ends as far as choice of subject is concerned. In Dostoyevsky's works, the crisis evolves due to (or is born of) rapid dramatic developments via sharp "external" collisions, for his novels are filled with action. However, in the case of Rasputin—in *Live and Remember* and even *Fire*—we have utter simplicity achieved by extreme mastery and painstaking effort. Yet the simplicity of *Live and Remember* is somewhat of an illusion. In terms of intensity of meaning, importance and complexity of problems presented, there is nothing simple about *Live and Remember*. Elements of intrigue and rapid unfolding of events are present here, but they are not obvious or striking: they are not so much a part of the action or deeds of the author's heroes as a part of the development and explication of the characters revealed by the crisis situation. For Andrei, this state

of mind begins somewhat earlier, when, after leaving the hospital, he heads not back to the front but homeward. For Nastyona, it begins a bit later, after her first meeting with Andrei when her suspicions that he has deserted are confirmed. From these two points, the hero begins his rapid descent, becoming a thoroughly degraded human being, while the heroine begins her ascent: her inner strength, kindness, and nobility of spirit are revealed.

"Am I really just myself? I am but a brief instant of a multitude of alien lives," said well-known Russian poet Nikolai Zabolotsky (1903-1958). These words come clearly to mind when one reads of the lives and fates of Rasputin's old women. The confusion in the poet's early verses where "the eternal winepress of nature" that squeezed "death and existence into one", gave way after many years of reflection, observation, and acquaintance with the works of outstanding philosophers and researchers to an understanding of the purpose behind the metamorphoses which occur in nature and the eternal renewal of life. This realization of the holy of holies of Eastern and Western art enabled the poet to conquer his fear of death. In the memoirs of his son, we read: "My father was protected from the fear of being destroyed as a discrete entity by his ideas about the unity and constant intertransformation of organic and inorganic matter. He was also comforted by the certainty that his verses would live after him and would become well-known and beloved of the people."¹

Old Anna in *Borrowed Time* is just as well protected from the "fear of being destroyed as a discrete entity". She has fulfilled her function on earth and

¹ *Voprosy literatury*, No. 5, 1976, p. 232.

will live on in her children and grandchildren. Her years of experience and oneness with nature and all living things when a cow, a horse, or a dog become almost like members of the family, the understanding and fulfilment of what had been ordained for her in life—the sum of her impressions, transformed into a unique type of knowledge—all protect her from any fear of death.

“And suddenly, now, just before the very end, it seemed to her that she had lived on earth before this, her present life. She couldn’t remember what she had been—whether she had crawled, walked, or flown. She couldn’t imagine. But it seemed to her that this was not the first time she had seen the earth. After all, birds were born twice: once as eggs, and then again when the eggs hatched. That meant such a miracle was possible, and she was not committing blasphemy by having such a thought. It had been long, long ago, during a terrible thunderstorm when the rain was pounding the ground and the lightning was flashing in the sky. Everything all around was rumbling and blazing, splitting the firmament, from which water poured in a solid wall. She had never been so terrified in all her life. It might well have been that this thunderstorm killed her, because she couldn’t remember anything else before or after it, only the storm itself, and even this recollection came to her like an echo of some earlier memory that was not her own.”

Old Anna does not believe in an afterlife, but has rather the ancient faith of the rationality of nature and its transformations. She is sure that life on earth is interminable.

Another characteristic feature of Rasputin’s prose which has grown more pronounced in his latest stories is his conviction that man does not yet know

himself, much less his surroundings, to the end. This is how the author describes the state of mind of Liusia, old Anna's daughter, during her walk in the forest (*Borrowed Time*): "...The road was not a well-travelled one. Ruts and tussocks made the going difficult. The air above it seemed to have been baked dry, and Liusia experienced a distinct sensation of stuffiness. She thought it would be better to walk across the field, but she didn't leave the road, because she couldn't take a single step to the side. She submitted to some alien will which was impossible to ignore. At last Liusia realized that she should never have set foot on that road. For her, it was now like a long narrow corridor with high invisible walls on either side which she could neither scale or go around. The corridor would surely lead her to something unexpected and quite possibly terrifying...

"'What's the matter with me?!' she reproached herself. 'Why can't I get a grip on myself? How could anything possibly happen to me in a place where I know every single bush for miles around?! How foolish! I know this forest like the back of my hand!.. How can I be afraid of anything here for even an instant?..'

"Suddenly, objecting to her self-assuredness and smothering it in an instant, the air was filled with a distant yet distinct and seemingly endless cry of terror:

"'Mi-i-sh-a-a-a!'

"Liusia shuddered and froze to the spot: she recognized that scream, for it was her own. Intermittently slowly, as if weighted down by some infinite burden, she turned her head to the left: the bird-cherry bush in the middle of the field was just where it had always been... Submitting to her first impulse she made a step toward the bush and unexpectedly left the road: it released her. And Liusia was not at all sur-

prised, for she realized that she was not the one deciding where she would go. Rather, she was under the control of some strange power which lived in these parts and was now calling her to confession."

There is no more mysticism here than we find in the "revelations" of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*. People find themselves in such psychological states when they are overcome by emotions and everything around them seems mysterious and "otherworldly". Without this sense of mystery, lofty amazement, and inexplicable terror, there would be no poetry or art at all. Ukrainian authoress Lesya Ukrainka (1871-1913) affirmed that mysticism in philosophy and poetry are quite different in essence. And this is also the case with Rasputin. Liusia's state of mind is not difficult to explain: during this visit to places she knew so well after a long absence, she was suddenly overcome by childhood memories and a gnawing feeling of guilt for having left home. The result is a particular mood which dictates otherwise inexplicable human deeds and states of mind...

In scenes depicting the unity of man and nature and his heroes' attempts to comprehend the lofty marvels nature conceals, Rasputin, like other great artists, is not at all affected, but is rather lyrical and original. His heroes are real people with genuinely deep feelings.

Rasputin writes very slowly, and the degree of mastery and depth of analysis increase with each successive work. He sheds light on ever-new facets of the human soul, expanding his rich reserve of means of expression. And through his heroes, he reveals himself. In this forward movement, the clearly recognized aim becomes increasingly defined due to the writer's integ-

richness of character, his boundless faith in humanity and the good, and of course, due to his talent and knowledge, which he constantly expands by persistent effort.

In three novellas (*Money for Maria*, *Borrowed Time*, and *Live and Remember*) the action takes place in an old Siberian village with its peculiar moral standards and traditional way of life, employing characters, ties, and language formed over the course of centuries. *Farewell to Matyora* seems to add the finishing touch to this theme. "I had no choice but to write *Matyora*," Rasputin said, "for what kind of son would not say farewell to his dying mother? This novella marks a particular boundary in my work as a writer. There is no way I can return to Matyora, for the island has been flooded. Obviously, along with the residents of this village who are so dear to my heart, I must move to the new village and see what happens to them there."

The way to "the new village" was a long and difficult one for the writer. The theater took up a great deal of his time and energy, for naturally, it could not ignore such a phenomenon in Soviet literature as this controversial author from Irkutsk. He spent two or three years working on the theatrical versions of his own novellas. Should the writer have sacrificed so much of his valuable time at the expense of his basic task? After all, readers were waiting to see what would happen to the former residents of Matyora in their new homes not of their own choosing. Of course, the theater provided Rasputin with a whole new audience he had not reached before. In Moscow alone, his plays have been hits for years now at the Moscow Art Theater and the Yermolova Theater. Although the author admits that he set about the task of dramatization without a thorough knowledge of the peculiar laws of theater in general, which are quite different

from those of prose, the plays based on his works have been successful, especially, amazingly enough, *Borrowed Time*. "Amazingly enough" because this novella seems quite inappropriate for the theater, since it is lacking in such traditional dramatic elements as rapid unfolding of events and intrigue in the theatrical sense...

Can we really regret that the author spent so much time on dramatization and screen-plays? After all, many major writers have considered the play and screen versions of their works extremely important.

Therefore, the appearance of the cycle of short stories *Live and Love* and the new novella *Fire* are a double treat for Rasputin's readers, since these works are both literary events and a sure sign that the author has returned to his fundamental task of writing fiction. In addition, *Fire* carries out his desire and promise to show what has become of the former residents of Matyora in the new village.

Thus, for more than twenty years, an extremely interesting writer and master of Russian prose has been working in our midst. He is sensitive to the fears and misfortunes of humanity. We have met up with him not only in books, films, and plays, for in recent years, Valentin Rasputin has often made his opinions known in the press, in magazines, on radio and television. In his publicistic work and civic activities, the writer invariably raises major issues and touches upon concrete social and economic problems which have already been posed in his fiction. Among the most important of them are nature conservation in Siberia and the protection of Lake Baikal so its unique beauty and bounty will be preserved for our descendants.

Rasputin considers these issues to be of national

importance, and fortunately, a great number of people in our country are in complete agreement with him. So he meets with many scientists, Party figures, and ministers. He meets with such people not only to pour out his feelings, for such practically-minded individuals are not swayed by emotions. They want hard facts, mathematical formulas, economic statistics, and ecological knowledge. The conversation Rasputin had with one such minister, about which he later wrote in an article which appeared in the newspaper *Izvestia*, convinces us not only by means of his passionate and carefully weighed rhetoric but also by the absolute competence of the writer's judgement. The two spoke as equals: Rasputin was able to counter the facts which had been prepared for the head of this department by a large number of researchers with data of his own, gathered through painstaking personal effort. When the data presented by the writer was checked out, it was determined to be thoroughly convincing. Doubtless, this article had an impact, for soon after, a government commission (of which the writer was made a member) to deal with the problems of Lake Baikal was set up.

They say a big ship has long journeys ahead. However, it seems Valentin Rasputin is guided in his life and work by another piece of folk wisdom: the greater one's gifts, the more one is expected to give. Perhaps that is the reason for the lengthy pauses between his communications with his readers. He has become even more scrupulous and demanding in his relations with publishers and colleagues alike. But his readers await new works of fiction with even greater hopes and expectations than before.

1978-1986

Valentin Rasputin

Essays

BAIKAL, BAIKAL...

...“The sacred sea”, “the sacred lake”, “the sacred waters”—these are the names Lake Baikal has borne from time immemorial. The original inhabitants of the region, the Russians who reached its shores in the 17th century, and foreign travellers alike have all bowed before its majesty, unearthly mystery, and fathomless beauty. The homage paid Lake Baikal by primitive peoples and those who were enlightened for the times in which they lived was equally rich and captivating, despite the fact that the interest of one group was primarily mystical, and of the other, esthetic and scientific. People have always been in awe of Lake Baikal, because it cannot be contained within the spiritual or material dimensions of the human imagination. The lake was not located where such a thing might be expected. It was not what might have been expected, in fact, in that or any other place. And it did not have anything like the effect on the human soul which was produced by ordinary, run-of-the-mill natural beauty. It was something special, something quite extraordinary, which had obviously

been wrought by the very hand of God.

With time, Lake Baikal was measured and studied; over the past few years, special deep-sea equipment has even been employed in this investigation. Once the lake's precise dimensions were known, the comparisons began. It was compared with the Caspian Sea and Tanganyika, for example. It was ascertained that the lake contains one-fifth of all the fresh water on the planet. Next, the origins of this marvelous body of water were explained, and it was suggested that there might well be animals, fish, and plants that existed there and nowhere else in the world. Reasons were proffered as to how species found in the lake had come to be there, though their normal habitats were thousands of kilometers away or in other parts of the globe entirely. But there was little agreement even among these various propositions and theories. Lake Baikal is not so simple as to be easily disrobed of the mysteries and puzzles which surround it. But nonetheless—and this is as it should be—according to its physical characteristics, Lake Baikal has been accorded the place it deserves among the wonders of the world which have been discovered and described. It has earned this place if only because it is a majestic organic entity untouched by human hands, unique and incomparable, and well aware of its eternal place in the order of things and of its own secret life.

How and with what, indeed, can its boundless beauty be compared? I will not attempt to assert that there is nothing more lovely on earth, for each of us tends to favor his own native region: for the Eskimos and Aleuts, as we all know, there is nothing more beautiful than tundra; its glacier fields are the culmination of natural perfection and plentitude. From birth, we feed on the breath, essence, and landscapes

of the places we call home. They influence our characters and organize the activities of which our lives consist to no mean extent. Therefore, it is not enough to say that they are dear to us: we are a part of our natural environment and it must and does speak within us in an ancient and mighty voice. It is senseless to compare or prefer the glaciers of Greenland to the sands of the Sahara, the Siberian taiga to the steppes of Central Russia, or even the Caspian Sea to Lake Baikal. We can only give our impressions of them, nothing more. They are all marvelously beautiful and amazing in the very fact of their existence. More often than not, attempts at comparison proceed from our lack of desire or ability to see and feel the uniqueness and sense of design or purpose in each of these remarkable phenomena or from our failure to be properly amazed at their existence.

But nonetheless, Nature has her favorites which she has wrought with particular love, and she bestows special powers upon them. Lake Baikal, the Pearl of Siberia, is surely such a creation. We will not speak here of its wealth of natural resources; that is another matter altogether. This lake is famed and sacred for another reason: for its miraculous life-giving strength and spirit, not of the past, as in much one finds today, but of the present. Baikal is not subject to time or change in its eternal majesty and spirit. Here, any man can test his mettle against the elements.

I remember how one of my guests walked with me for a long time along the shore to the old road which rings the lake. It is one of the most vividly beautiful places in the southern part of Lake Baikal. It was August, the finest and most pleasant time of year there, when the water is warm, and the hills are ablaze with color. Sometimes it even seems the stones have

burst into bloom, they so exude warm hues. The sun glimmers off the new-fallen snow on the bare peaks of the Sayany Mountains which seem much closer to the naked eye than they actually are. By that time of year, Lake Baikal has already been filled with water from the melting glaciers, and it lies sated, often calm, gathering strength for the approaching autumn storms. Along the shore, a multitude of fish play while the seagulls cry overhead. The roadsides abound in berries—raspberries, black and red currants—and honeysuckle... That particular day was a fine and rare one indeed: the sun shone, and the wind had fallen. It was warm and the air was ringing; Lake Baikal was perfectly clear and absolutely still. The rocks on the bottom gleamed and sparkled, changing colors in the sunlight. The air smelled first of the fragrant wildflowers that grew in the warm alpine meadows in the distance; then, quite unexpectedly, that aroma was replaced by a cool, pungent breath of sea air.

A couple of hours later, my companion was already overcome by the wild and exciting beauty of summer pressing him from all sides, the likes of which he had never seen and had certainly never imagined. I repeat that the riotous beauty of summer was at its height. Add to this picture the gurgling mountain streams (I want to say: with their solemn, crystal-clear music) emptying into Lake Baikal. We descended to its shores time and again to taste the cool, refreshing liquid and observe with what mysteriousness and self-assurance these streams mingled with these maternal waters and became lost in eternity. Then consider the frequent tunnels, executed with such great attention to detail and good taste that they seemed natural here, although these were about as many as the road had kilometers. Above them rose

steep cliffs, solemn and austere in some places and whimsical in others, as if they had just finished playing some frantic game.

My companion was so overcome by the myriad of impressions that soon his capacity for wonder and inspiration was exhausted, and he fell silent. I continued talking, telling him how I had been deceived when once, as a student at the university, I visited Lake Baikal: the water was so clear when I was out boating that I attempted to pick up a stone from the bottom which turned out to be at a depth of more than four meters when I measured it. When my friend failed to react to this tale, I took offense and informed him that it was possible to see to a depth of forty meters in some parts of the lake, the water was so pure, then made some crack about the Moskva River. Finally, I realized what was wrong with him: even if I had told him that we could read the mint date on a tiny two-kopeck coin at a depth of two or three hundred meters in Lake Baikal, he could not have been more amazed than he already was. He had already reached his limit.

For him, the final shock of the day was provided by a ringed seal, for these shy creatures rarely swim close to the shore. But as if by special order, the beast appeared in the water not far away, and when I pointed its presence out to my guest, he suddenly yelled loudly and began to whistle and motion for the seal to come closer as if it were a dog. Needless to say, the animal dived under the water forthwith. My friend fell silent in utter shock from the appearance of the seal and did not make a sound for quite some time.

I have recounted this tale, insignificant in and of itself, solely to give myself an opportunity to quote a few words from the ecstatic letter he sent me after

returning home from Lake Baikal. "I feel stronger, but that's not the point," he wrote. "The main thing is that now, I have been uplifted by the spirit of Lake Baikal. Now I feel that I can accomplish a great deal. Moreover, I can distinguish between what is essential and what is not. How wonderful that there is such a place as Lake Baikal! I rise in the morning and bow low in the direction of this marvelous lake, the father of us all, and feel I can move mountains..."

I understand his feelings quite well...

My friend saw only a tiny bit of Lake Baikal on a fine summer day when sunlight and stillness reigned supreme. He knows nothing of how, on exactly the same kind of sunny day when the air is so transparent as to be absolutely invisible, for no apparent reason, the lake can rage as if bestirred by some furious inner cauldron. It is truly an unbelievable sight: utter stillness, no wind at all, and the crashing of waves which have surged for kilometers from the site of the storm all the way to the shore.

My companion had never found himself in the grip of a *sarma*, a *kultuk*, or a *barguzin*, as the local people call the winds which can arise in an instant in the river valleys and wreak havoc on the lake, raising four-to-six-meter waves.

My friend never saw the northern part of Lake Baikal with its austere, primeval beauty. There, one loses all sense of time and man's illustrious deeds, so bountifully and regally does eternity reign over the pure waters of the lake. Over the last few years, by the way, man has attempted, in his customary fashion, to make up for lost time in eliminating the sense of sovereignty, eternity, calm and pulchritude of the region.

Neither did he see Peschanaya Bay where there are

more sunny days in a year than at the famed resorts of the south and the Caucasus. Nor did he visit Chivyrkyi Gulf where in summer, the water is almost as warm as that of the Black Sea.

He knows nothing of Lake Baikal in the winter when the transparent ice, blown clean by the winds, seems so thin that beneath it, as under an amazing sheet of glass, swirls the water of the lake, somehow alive despite the bitter cold. It is terrifying to step onto such ice, although in fact, it is a meter thick or more. My visitor has never heard the cracking and rumbling of the ice breaking up in spring, when wide, fathomless chasms appear on the surface, making it impassable. Then the ice comes together again to form enormous blue hummocks, quite remarkable to behold.

He has never been deceived by the magical vision of a blinding white vessel under sail approaching swiftly or of a lovely medieval castle of pure ice suspended in mid-air, as if considering the best place to alight; or swans with their proud necks arched high, swimming quite close by, unafraid of any human presence... These are the mirages of Lake Baikal, a very common phenomenon in these parts, and one with which many remarkable legends and superstitions are connected.

My friend missed a lot, indeed. It is really fair to say that he saw, heard, and experienced almost nothing. Even those of us who live near Lake Baikal cannot boast of knowing it well, because it is impossible to learn and comprehend absolutely everything—the lake retains its mysteries, and that is what makes it Baikal, after all. Lake Baikal is always different: nothing is ever repeated. The colors, weather, movement, and very spirit of the lake are in constant flux.

The fantastic spirit of the lake is something which forces one to believe in the old legends and reflect with mystical apprehension on exactly how free man is to do as he sees fit in some places.

Nonetheless, although he came for a very short time and saw practically nothing, that was sufficient for my friend to get a feeling for, if not to understand, something of Lake Baikal. In such cases, the resulting feeling depends upon us and our ability or lack thereof to accept the spiritual essence of this experience.

It would seem that Lake Baikal might overwhelm a person with its size and majesty, for everything about it is enormous, untrammelled, and mysterious.

But instead, one is uplifted and experiences a rare feeling of spirituality, as if in the face of eternity and perfection, the secret mark of these magical concepts had touched one in a special way. One is aware of the nearness of an omnipotent presence which enters one and imparts a bit of its supernatural essence. One feels somehow blessed from the mere fact of having stood on that shore, breathed that air, and drunk of that marvelous water. Nowhere else will a person experience such a sensation of oneness with nature and comprehension of its mysteries. The very air is intoxicating and makes the head spin as one is borne fantastically above the water before having time to realize what has happened. Lake Baikal abounds in places of such pulchritude as to be unimaginable this side of Paradise. Everyone who visits the lake returns from these life-giving waters with fresh hope for the future.

Purified, inspired, and invigorated in body and mind, the visitor will be unable to ignore the restorative powers of the lake. This is something each person will feel within himself, but the mere miracle of its

existence is sufficient for us.

Upon returning from a walk one day, Lev Tolstoy wrote:

“How, in the midst of all nature’s charms, can a person harbor malice, vengeance, or the desire to harm creatures similar to himself? It would seem that intercourse with nature—that direct expression of beauty and goodness—should purge all thoughts of evil from the human heart.”

It is the eternal misfortune of mankind that we are not in harmony with the ancient and noble natural environment that surrounds us.

Nature in and of itself is always moral. Only man can make it immoral. Perhaps it is nature, after all, which to a large extent keeps us within a more or less rational framework and determines our ethical state. Perhaps it is nature which fosters our prudence and worthy deeds. It is nature which day and night appeals to us with hope and caution on behalf of all those who have gone before and will come after us. Who can remain indifferent to this plea? Long ago, before any member of the Evenk tribe cut down a birch of necessity, he would elaborately beg the tree’s forgiveness for taking its life. But we are a different breed entirely. Perhaps it is the knowledge that people pitied a mere birch tree two or three hundred years ago that instills in us now the moral responsibility to stay the indifferent hand poised over the sacred lake itself and to repay it a hundredfold what has been put into us by Nature, Baikal included. If we are capable of stilling our destructive hand and repaying one good deed with another, perhaps we will be able to lead an existence which can be considered in any sense moral...

THE REAL SIBERIA

This enormous territory bears the general title of Siberia, and it will, in all probability, retain this name, for nothing other than Siberia can ever come of it.

Vladimir Andriyevich,
Historian of Siberia

“Siberia” is not so much a word as a concept pealing forth like a mighty bell, reminding us of some infinite entity confronting the limits of human consciousness. Interest in Siberia has fallen and risen over the years, but now, it is growing by leaps and bounds. The word rings in our ears: Siberia, vast, unfathomable Siberia! The sound gives hope and assurance to some, while the bold footstep of man there flashes through the minds of others. Some have no particular reaction at all to the word but nonetheless have a vague sense of the great changes afoot in that distant land which will ease the burdens of the rest of the world. Those who have never visited Siberia invariably have some feeling for the place, even though they are not affected in any way by the interests of the region as such. This is because Siberia has touched the lives of many people, if not as a physical or material concept, then as a moral one, bringing with it some unclear yet desirable breath of fresh air.

In the 18th century, it was said: “Siberia is our Peru and Mexico.” “It is our United States,” was the shibboleth in the 19th. And in the present century, the watchword has become: “Siberia is the source of a colossal amount of energy”, “a land of unlimited possibilities”. As we see, technological advances have

brought about changes in man's needs and expectations and in the characteristics of Siberia itself. Its natural wealth and resources, both on and near the surface and deep in the bowels of the earth, as well as the vast industrial potential of the region, are all part of what we think of as Siberia. This land has had a great deal to offer in every century, something which has been obvious from the first rumors of it to reach the European part of Russia all the way to the latest scientific and economic documentation of the region's almost incomprehensible potential. But particularly now, when the Earth is literally beginning to suffocate from a lack of fresh air, it is turning to the vast virgin forests of Siberia as "the lungs of the planet". Clearly, in the next thirty to fifty years, Siberia will truly become a healing force, and perhaps the saving grace of the entire globe.

We are accustomed to making comparisons, but there is simply nothing with which Siberia can be compared. We can only examine the results of the human endeavors in terms of what has been developed, and no more. For there is nothing on earth even vaguely analogous to Siberia. It could practically exist as a separate planet, for it contains everything which should be present in all three natural kingdoms—on the ground, above, and below it—actually to constitute a planet. Its own life, so varied in form and character, cannot be expressed by any known concepts except the word Siberia! With all that is good and bad, obvious and unobvious, perfected and unperfected, accessible and inaccessible, it remains a place with its own distinct character, unlike anything else on Earth.

From one end to the other, and in each particular region, above the land hovers a spirit which still has

not decided whether it will be benign or maleficent: that depends upon how humankind behaves. In the four centuries that have passed since the Russians first set foot upon this land, Siberia seems to have remained a giant tamed and given a godly appearance in places, but still slumbering for the most part. One would hope that this vast spiritual awakening—this acquisition of self-consciousness—lies ahead as yet.

The precise etymology and meaning of the word Siberia has never been determined. To an outsider who knows nothing of this land but what he has heard in passing, this forbidding, fabulously rich region of truly enormous proportions seems cosmic-ally cold and alien. Such a person will probably perceive the native Siberian more as a product of the curious nature of the region than as someone akin to him who is actually puzzling due to the fact that humanity as a whole is somewhat of a mystery. For those of us who were born and raised in Siberia, there is nothing dearer on Earth. We love and are prepared to defend it just as anyone else would his own homeland. And Siberia is perhaps more in need of defense than any other place on Earth, because here, unlike many other locales, there is still something left to defend from the relentless onslaughts of civilization. Those very aspects of Siberia which frighten others are not just familiar to us: they are essential to our very being. We breathe easier when the winter is an extremely cold one without any thaws. The wild taiga, untrespassed by man, calms rather than terrifies us. Our untrammelled, restive souls were shaped by its boundless expanses and mighty rivers. There have always been different conceptions of Siberia: those of the insiders and the outsiders. Though they have drawn closer and even begun to overlap, they are still

different even now. The outsiders are accustomed to regard Siberia as a rich province, the development of which consists in relieving the area as quickly as possible of its great natural wealth. But the residents of this land, who are invariably Siberian patriots, have always seen its development not just in terms of the *rational* exploitation of natural resources and sensible industrialization. We Siberians are extremely concerned that the most valuable of our land's resources—those which any normal person can see are essential to the very survival of the planet—not be destroyed by a rash outburst of industrial development aimed at exploiting the other seemingly inexhaustible natural riches of the area. All the gold, oil, and timber of Siberia taken together is not nearly as valuable as its air, water, and arable land. The pure air produced by the vast tracts of virgin forest can be breathed without harming the lungs. Pure water, in plentiful supply here, is already a scarce commodity on many parts of the globe. A great deal of arable land could be put under plough to feed many more people than at present.

Essentially, humanity could use Siberia and a few other untouched regions of the Earth to begin a new life. One way or another, if we wish to continue to exist, we must solve some major problems, such as what we are going to breathe, drink, and eat, as well as to what ends we intend to use the human intellect. These four questions are becoming increasingly crucial global issues, and we have yet to find a decent solution to any of them. If the word "Siberia" itself does not mean "salvation", then surely it could at least be considered a synonym. This fact alone could allow us Russians to fulfil at least a portion of our purpose here on Earth.

But here, we must give the character of the people its due. The Russians are known for their decisiveness and indefatigability in finishing what they have started. If there were more space for comment, I could easily show that persistence in carrying out any undertaking is the prime reason for the Russians' successes.

Alexander Radischev¹

A Note on Yermak²

Siberia lies on the same land mass as Europe, being separated from it only by the Ural Mountains, hardly an unsurmountable barrier. Yet for all practical purposes, it was discovered by the civilized world almost a century later than America.

Of course, rumors of this distant and mysterious land reached the West, and merchants of Novgorod³ even conducted trade in the area, reaching the northern seas. But they did not consider this in any way out of the ordinary and did not inform anyone of their exploits. Rather, they passed their businesses

¹*Alexander Radischev* (1749-1802)—Russian revolutionary thinker, writer, and propagator of revolutionary ideas in Russia. His major work was *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790).—*Ed.*

²*Yermak* (?-1585)—a Cossack headman. During a campaign which started in about 1581, he began opening up Siberia for the Russian Empire. He is subsequently the hero of many folk songs.—*Ed.*

³*Novgorod*—known from 859 A. D. From 1136 to 1478, capital of the independent principality of Veliky Novgorod.—*Ed.*

on to their sons. The citizens of Novgorod knew of the existence of Yugra, as the northern lands to the east of the Ural Mountains were called, by the 11th century and perhaps even earlier. The word "Siberia" appeared in the Russian chronicles for the first time at the beginning of the 15th century in connection with the demise of Khan Tokhtamysh, the very one who, after the Battle of Kulikovo (1380) burned Moscow. His reign was not a long one: he was killed "on the Siberian land" during internecine strife.

The rumors about Siberia which reached Western Europe from time to time in those years were so fantastic and far-fetched as to avoke either sheer terror or utter astonishment. Some of these rumors, obviously referring to the Urals, found their way into Herodotus' celebrated *History*: "Passing over a great extent of this rough country, you come to a people dwelling at the foot of lofty mountains, who are said to be all—both men and women—bald from their birth, to have flat noses, and very long chins..." Further, the venerable Herodotus expresses his doubts: "The bald men say, but it does not seem to me credible, that the people who live in these mountains have feet like goats; and that after passing them you find another race of men who sleep during one half of the year."¹

It is understandable and forgivable that foreigners in ancient and medieval times considered Siberia to be populated by monsters having the heads of dogs or no heads at all, their eyes and mouths being situated on their bellies. But there is a Russian manuscript of the 16th century—the very century in which the unification of Siberia with the Russian Empire began—which

¹*The History of Herodotus*. Transl. by G. Rawlinson, Tudor Publishing Company, New York, 1946, pp. 211-12.

repeats the old wives' tale that people there die in the winter and come to life again in the spring. No wonder I was asked a couple of years ago in West Berlin: "What do you do in Siberia in the winter?" as if the only possible alternative was to hibernate.

Pyotr Vyazemsky, poet, literary critic, and friend of Pushkin, had something interesting to say about such opinions: "If you want to addle the brains of some intelligent Frenchman or German, all you have to do is ask him his opinion of Russia, and he will instantly lose all semblance of rationality." This comment is even more apropos when the subject at hand is Siberia, and it is not at all necessary to go to Europe to observe this phenomenon. The very idea of Siberia has long dimmed the reason of Russians living west of the Urals to such an extent that we may only regret that no one has put together an anthology of these misconceptions for the amusement of our descendants. However, these misconceptions have not always been innocuous and were frequently reflected in quite harmful orders (*ukazes*) which had to be carried out.

As in antiquity, man continues to search for miracles and mysteries which are not in keeping with the scientifically established order of the world. However, in this respect, Siberia has proven to be a great disappointment to man's spirit of doubts and contradictions, since things there are much the same as elsewhere.

It is well known that Yermak Timofeyevich was the man who forged the way to Siberia for the Russian Empire. The fact that Yermak and those under his command were Cossacks is extremely significant. The word "cossack" is of Tatar origin, and it means a daring or bold fellow, a person who has broken away from his milieu. Cossackdom appeared in Russia soon

after the overthrow of the Tatar yoke and was firmed up in the 16th century with the strengthening of feudal dependence and serfdom among the Russian people. Men who had no desire to submit to any kind of oppression, including that imposed by their fellow Slavs, ran away to the wild reaches of the Don or Volga rivers, founding their own settlements there, electing atamans (headmen), and adopting laws, thus beginning a new and untrammelled life, unsubjugated by any tsar or khan. Later, as a matter of survival, the Russian Cossacks submitted to the authority of the tsar, but that had not yet happened in the 16th century, and the Cossacks were the masters of their own fates. The tsars played on the Cossacks' patriotic sentiments to pit them against their troublesome southern neighbors, the Turks, as well as the Crimean and Nogai Tatars. But in response to unruliness or as a result of diplomatic maneuvering, they could just as easily send a punitive expedition against the very same Cossacks who had helped them earlier. Relations between Moscow and the free Cossacks were always complex, especially in the initial stages. In one sense they were useful: if Russia were faced with some serious danger, the Cossacks felt it their bounden duty to defend her, whether the threat appeared from nearby Turkey in the south or distant Lithuania to the west. On the eve of his Siberian expedition, for example, according to the most recent historical evidence, Yermak Timofeyevich took part in the war against the Lithuanian invaders (1558-83).

The Cossacks played an exceptional, almost unbelievable role in the opening up and taming of Siberia. Only men of unusual audacity and daring who miraculously remained unbroken by the oppressive practices of the Russian autocracy could have done what

the Cossacks did in Siberia.

Yermak is a case in point of the shortness of our Russian memories and negligence when it comes to history. From time the Tatar yoke (1243-1480) was cast off to the time of Peter the Great, there was not a more important or fortunate event in Russian history than the uniting of Siberia to the Russian territories. After all, Siberia was several times larger than all of Old Rus put together. This one fact alone is enough to capture our imaginations and sweep them away beyond the Ural Mountains to the deep snow-drifts of that distant land.

We know absolutely everything about Columbus and his discovery of America: we know where he was born and what he did until he became famous. We know the day and month he set off on his first journey, as well as the second, third, and fourth ones. We know when he reached the shores of North America, when the flagship *Santa Maria* struck a reef, and what happened after that... We know quite a lot, in fact! We know more about the ancient Roman emperors and patricians than we do about Yermak. True enough, he was hardly in a position to keep a ship's log, as Columbus did. He did not have at his side an efficient historian contemplating murder, as did Nero. But sadly, at the time, no one appreciated the significance of his person or the magnitude of his deeds during the Siberian campaign. It was only later that we realized we knew nothing of Yermak—not even what family or region he hailed from. Nor did we note down the year he took up his sword against Kuchum¹, how many of his Cossacks came to the

¹*Kuchum* (?—circa 1598), Khan of the Siberian Khanate (circa 1563). Fought Yermak from 1582-85.—*Ed.*

assistance of the Stroganovs¹ or what precise aid they rendered. Did he manage in a single campaign, as well-known Soviet historian R. Skrynnikov maintains, to reach Isker, the capital of the Siberian Khanate? Or did he return for fresh supplies and arms after wintering along the way? We can suspect the Stroganov Chronicles² of inaccuracy precisely because they were written by the Stroganovs themselves and may have exaggerated the role of that family in the unification of Siberia with Russia. Another document, the *Synodic* of Archbishop Cyprian of Tobolsk, compiled forty years after Yermak's death according to accounts of actual participants in the campaign, must also be studied with reservations. The clerics of the region were exceedingly interested in transforming Yermak into a local saint, and so for that reason, all the facts about his life which were not suitable to a man being considered for canonization, were either glossed over or eliminated from the account altogether. The saying that he who would have a good command of the present must know the past is quite true in this case.

We have wondered for centuries whether the folk songs claiming that Yermak, like Stepan Razin³, meandered along the Volga and Don rivers, preying on the merchants' and tsar's caravans before he and his men reached Siberia, might not be true. Or did

¹*Stroganovs*—the major Russian merchants and industrialists from the 16th to the 20th centuries.—*Ed.*

²*The Stroganov Chronicles*—Siberian chronicles composed in the 17th century by one of the Stroganov heirs, emphasizing the role of this family in organizing Yermak's campaign.—*Ed.*

³*Stepan Razin* (circa 1630-1671)—a Don Cossack who led the Peasant Wars of 1670-71.—*Ed.*

the people, confusing virtues, attribute spurious deeds to one who did not perform them at all? Is Yermak a nickname or a short form of Yermolai? Or perhaps the name comes from Yeremei or Yermil... There is no end to such arguments and suppositions.

There is hardly any way of solving this mystery now if it could not be solved even then, closer to the actual events. Yermak of the "unknown clan and noble spirit" (Nikolai Karamzin) will probably remain, as before, Yermak. It might be said that his name is not so important—after all, that is not the main point. But neither is it insignificant. It is to our great shame that our short memories have caused us to fall far short of paying such a heroic figure the honor due him.

But true enough, this is not the main thing. The fact of the matter is that four hundred years following this legendary campaign, the Russian people remember thusly:

*On the wild bank of the Irtysh
Sits Yermak, lost in thought.*

In terms of the first Siberian hero and his deeds, we are obviously better off sticking to the standard versions of events, since the corrections proffered by contemporary historians are not convincing enough in and of themselves to be accepted without reservations. There is hardly any reason to whitewash the segment of Yermak's biography he reputedly spent as a brigand with a band on the Volga River. If his men robbed for a living, could not Yermak have done the same for a while? Folk wisdom on this matter is probably more accurate than contemporary attempts to deny such happenings, especially in light of what we

know of the times and Cossack ethics. After all, Yermak had been a Cossack for over twenty years and had been elected a headman, so why should he have abstained from the actions common to Cossack bands of that period? As the song goes:

*Oh Terrible Tsar, accept Yermak's humble respects,
I send you the whole land of Siberia as a gift,
All Siberia is yours now, so forgive me in return!*

Thus, Yermak and his companions traveled up and down the Volga, taking part in battles and skirmishes, while the well-known merchant family, the Stroganovs, settled along what was then the eastern border of the Russian Empire—the Chusovaya, Kama, and Lysva rivers in the Ural Mountains—set up profitable salt-works, and engaged in agriculture, fur trapping, and other activities. Not satisfied with these gains, they asked Ivan the Terrible to grant them all the land along the Tobol and Irtysh rivers in Siberia. Such a gift cost Ivan the Terrible nothing, since it did not belong to him anyway: it was the territory of Tatar Khan Kuchum who had united the Siberian tribes and converted them by the sword to Islam. On the one hand, the Stroganovs had their eye on a vast and desirable tract of land which seemingly belonged to them but actually did not. On the other hand, Kuchum had grown stronger and was making ever more frequent incursions into neighboring settlements. It is only natural that under such circumstances, the Stroganovs would turn to the Cossacks for assistance.

We have no way of knowing now who took the initiative—Yermak himself, perhaps forced to flee the Volga region due to his many crimes, or the Stroganovs, who had decided at last to take serious action

against their neighbor to the east. Neither do we know whether Yermak had any doubts about undertaking the difficult and dangerous campaign to Siberia. However, it would have been a pity if anyone other than Yermak had taken up the banner against Kuchum, since this role was quite suitable for him, a man of the people. It was as if the people themselves had sent him to carry out this superhuman task in Siberia and seen to it that he did not remain without glory. He and Stepan Razin became the eternal favorites of the Russian people, personifying their age-old untrammelled aspirations. But while Stepan Razin's revolt for freedom took place on Russian soil, Yermak flung open the door to a wonderful new, free and boundless land.

He set off on his campaign in 1581, or in 1579 or 1582 according to other accounts. During the celebration of the tricentennial of this momentous event, a Russian magazine wrote: "Yermak's glorious deed—the conquering of an entire kingdom with a handful of Cossacks—is amazing, of course. Although firearms are certainly superior to bows and arrows, we must remember that locusts put out giant fires lit to block their paths of destruction, though enormous swarms perish in the process. There were only five hundred Cossacks, while the enemy numbered in the thousands. They could have resisted with a sufficiently persistent defense if the head of the bold Russian adventurers had not been the outstanding, skilful commander and organizer Yermak, and if the ties between the various Siberian tribes had been stronger. In praising Yermak's remarkable deed, we cannot help but be amazed that a man of the common people became the embodiment of the manifest destiny which moved Rus to the east in the direction of Asia and which continues to move

it in that direction up to the present. The first decisive step beyond the Urals was taken by Yermak, and all others have followed him."

The deeds of those others are no less amazing.

No! Everything the Russian people could possibly have done in Siberia, they have done with unusual energy, and the results of these labors there are worthy of amazement for their enormous scope. No other people in the history of the world could have covered such a fantastic distance in the course of a century and a half and asserted themselves there! Everything the Russian people have accomplished seems to be beyond human power and the historical order of things.

N. Yadrintsev

It is not clear why Nikolai Yadrintsev, well-known Siberian writer and scholar of the last century, wrote of a mere century and a half spent by the Russian people in Siberia, asserting themselves there. Obviously, he is referring more to the process of assertion wherein the Russians explored the length and breadth of Siberia and decided where best to engage in agriculture, furtrapping, and mining.

Yermak captured Isker, the capital of the Siberian Khanate, in the fall of 1582, and in August of 1585, he perished in unequal battle, after which those of his men who survived were forced to retreat. In 1639, Ivan Moskvitin, who had done military service on the Yenisei River, set up a winter hut on the Sea of Okhotsk and the Russians reached the Pacific Ocean.

In 1648, Semyon Dezhnyov¹ crossed the strait separating Asia and America—an unbelievable feat! A person who has any idea at all of the vast, godforsaken distances involved cannot help but be amazed. There were no paths to guide Dezhnyov and his comrades, so they sailed along one river after another, making large portages with boats and heavy baggage on foot. They wintered until the ice broke in spring in log huts quickly thrown up in those totally unfamiliar parts inhabited by less than friendly nomads. Dezhnyov and his men suffered from cold, hunger, illness, wild animals and midges. They lost comrades and strength with every crossing. There were no maps or reliable accounts to guide his company, but rather hearsay which often proved to be sheer invention. This small group of men forged further and further eastward with no certainty of what the morrow would bring.

As a result of this courageous journey, there appeared winter quarters on the rivers, fortified settlements, maps, and travel notes on how to deal with the natives, farm land, salt-works, and markers pointing the way. But for the first hearty band to traverse this route, everything was new and fraught with danger.

Even today, we invariably consider every step forward and each completed project of those who are taming Siberia a remarkable feat. So it would do us no harm to recall more frequently and stretch our imaginations in an attempt to comprehend the first steps our ancestors took in this terra incognita.

¹*Semyon Dezhnyov* (circa 1605-1673)—a Russian explorer who discovered the strait between Asia and America, presently known as the Bering Strait, although the Danish navigator arrived some eighty years later.—*Ed.*

"He trudges through the endless snows of the Tobol forests, a heavy arquebus issued during the campaign from the voivoda's¹ coffers slung across his shoulders. He is searching for new rivers rich in sable and making maps of the area. He crosses enormous expanses of snow on skis, gallops forward on a shaggy bay, another on a lead rope behind him. He sits at the stern of a broad flat-bottomed boat, a tawed leather sail flapping above his head. Danger threatens him at every turn. He hears an arrow with black feathers whiz above his head. He does not spare himself, considering himself expendable. Toward the end of his active life, he has engaged in hand-to-hand combat countless times, and his wounds are innumerable. He sleeps in the snow, eats whatever he can lay his hands on, hasn't seen a loaf of freshly-baked bread for years, and is often forced to dine on pine bark or food which anyone else would consider inedible. He has not received his allotment of money, bread, and salt from the state treasury for years. Preparing for an expedition in search of new rivers and farm land, he makes all the necessary purchases with his own funds, acquiring debts he will never be able to pay, signing promisory notes at outrageous interest rates."

This is the portrait writer Sergei Markov paints of Siberian explorer Semyon Dezhnyov at the beginning of his essay. And these are far from all the difficulties this discoverer had to surmount on his long journeys. We must add the troubles caused by the injustice and greed of such voivodas as Yakutsk boyar Pyotr Golovin. Then there was the craftiness and back-stabbing of the local nobility who could not be counted on for anything. Moreover, hardly anyone in the settlements

¹*voivoda*—military governor.—*Ed.*

escaped the injustice, persecution and denunciations of the tsarist officials. The struggle against those who abrogated the rules of Cossackdom and wanted to go their own way sometimes reached the level of pitched battles, as was the case with Cossacks Yerofei Khabarov¹ or Semyon Dezhnyov, future great explorers. All these obstacles must be added to the difficulties presented by the harsh environment of Siberia. Many were shipwrecked and disappeared without a trace, leaving not a single reminder of themselves behind. They wintered in utterly uninhabitable polar regions and lost their sense of time during the long polar night. Unquestionably, exploring Siberia took its toll on them. They set out strong hearty Cossacks, morally and physically prepared to endure all the deprivations and hardships they would face, though they could hardly have been aware of a tenth of them. Those who survived these trials were a special breed when all was said and done—individuals of almost superhuman strength and endurance before whom the Earth itself should have bowed low. There has never been anyone like them since, for they can truly be considered the pioneers of the Russian spirit. It was a spontaneous movement on the whole, carried out on a mass scale by ordinary people at their own risk; orders of the tsar or his military governors often lagged far behind these exploits. The service these pioneers and explorers performed is truly incomprehensible, for we lack the diligence and imagination to follow mentally the long paths these unsung heroes covered on foot over vast tracts of Siberia.

What was it that drew them to the east? What

¹Yerofei Khabarov (circa 1610—after 1667)—a Russian explorer who compiled *A Map of the Amur River*.—Ed.

compelled them to endure all hardships and dangers in their rush toward the Pacific? Usually, a single motivation is proffered: the overpowering urge to make their fortunes, the necessity of discovering new lands rich in untapped natural resources, especially valuable pelts, as well as desire, in the service of the tsar and his officials, to collect *yasak* or tribute from conquered peoples. Perhaps that might also have been one of the reasons, but if it had been the only one, the Cossack trailblazers would not have been in such a hurry. In the fifty or sixty years it took them to make it from the Irtysh River to the Pacific Ocean, a rich supply of ermine and sable were still available in the part of Siberia which had already been "discovered" by man, and the forts the Cossacks built in a hurry and left behind them in their journey eastward were not very sturdy, certainly, not populous, and provided no real defense. It would have seemed more sensible to take their time about moving forward, leaving secure fortifications in their wake which could have provided them with the necessary supplies and materiel in case of need. These settlements would have served as a reliable rear for the Cossacks, and having thus made sure the path behind them was secure, they could have forged ahead at an unhurried pace. However, they were clearly in quite a rush. How could such men stay home, leading calm, rational lives when they had heard rumors from the nomads of the mighty River Yenisei which lay ahead, and the surging Lena populated by a large, skilful people, the Yakuts. Moreover, the rivers turned completely about to meet the rising sun. No, it is not at all in keeping with the Russian character to sit by calmly waiting for orders to move on. It is totally un-Russian to be sensible and show forethought when there is the off-chance of

making some great discovery. We can be sure that not only base greed drew the Cossacks forward, and that it was not just the spirit of competition (which is already nobler) but something more that spurred them on in their desire. It was as if the will of history itself played a major role here in favoring at that particular time what was thought to be a somnolent and downtrodden people, picking out the bravest among them to test them and see what their actual capabilities were. An upsurge in national pride provided much of the energy for this incredible undertaking.

Unfortunately, we do not erect monuments to outstanding cities, but somehow, it would be exceedingly appropriate, somewhere in the expanses of Siberia, for example, near the Lena River itself, where in the 17th century, the most remarkable of its explorers gathered, to erect a monument to Veliky Ustyug, a city known from 1207 which declined considerably over the centuries and is now chiefly known as a producer of accordions. But in those years, the name of Veliky Ustyug, which had once challenged the powerful Veliky Novgorod itself, still resounded throughout the land. Its greatness and glory were touted by its native sons: Semyon Dezhnyov, Yerofei Khabarov, Vasily Poyarkov, Vladimir Atlasov, Vasily Bugor, Parfyon Khodyryov, and many others who won fame on the rivers, seas, and portages of Siberia. That so many of these early explorers could be from the same city seems not only surprising but unbelievable! What was it about this cradle of seafarers and explorers that produced such stalwart souls? If Semyon Dezhnyov, the discoverer of the Bering Strait, alone had hailed from the city, that would have been sufficient to win it a place in the annals of history. The odyssey of Yerofei Khabarov would be the pride of any capital,

had he been born there. Then we have Atlasov who discovered Kamchatka and Poyarkov who explored the enormous territory of Northeastern Siberia! Perhaps even the legendary Penda, the predecessor of all who reached the Lena River From Mangazeya¹, was from Veliky Ustyug.

It is also worth mentioning that twice in the course of a decade (in 1630 and 1637) Veliky Ustyug and its neighbors, Totma and Solvychegodsk, sent their young women to distant Siberia to marry the first Russian settlers serving as government officials there. Knowing of such an event, it is very difficult for the Siberians of today not to feel their kinship with this city and not to feel some urge to pay it due respect from afar! We also owe a great deal to the whole of Northern Russia where Novgorod, Vologda, Arkhangelsk, and Vyatka are found, for from there, in the wake of the Cossacks, came the farmers and skilled craftsmen, and the initial settling of Siberia began.

Siberia was fated to become part and parcel of Russia, and this is indeed what has occurred. Yermak rapidly drove a sharp wedge into the Siberian Khanate, putting an end to its former might. The Cossack explorers penetrated to the very depths of the land, built their settlements, joining Siberian lands to the Russian Empire. However, the real Siberia was created not by warfare or the influx of Russian Cossacks, trappers, and merchants, but by those who came in their wake to settle there permanently and work the land. The waves of settlers stimulated by profit came and went. First, there was the hunt for furs, then

¹*Mangazeya*—a thriving Russian town which existed in Western Siberia from 1601-1672.—*Ed.*

mammoth tusks, gold, and other precious metals. When the wealth of the Siberian forests and the mineral resources had been extracted and exploited to the extent that was possible in those days, the fortune seekers set out for home, spreading gloomy rumors along the way that Siberia was a dead land bereft of riches, with no chance of success or even a comfortable existence to be had. That's always how it is: the robber never bothers to thank his victim. Many of our country's finest minds of the last century, dismayed by what seemed to be Siberia's lack of productivity, were of the sincere opinion that Siberia was fed solely by the wealth of Russia and was only good for draining the strength of its benefactor. But the ordinary farmers who came to this chaste, sparsely populated land in the wake of the Cossacks ploughed the steppes or rooted up the taiga to make arable fields. Every year they planted grain and brought in harvests. They raised children, and the numbers of pioneer families multiplied. Gradually, by their persistent efforts, they tamed the wild areas in which they had settled and made them quite accessible and liveable. Opinions about Siberia changed with time, as interest waxed and waned: from the latest cornucopia, Siberia was transformed into something of a garbage dump—a hideout for all manner of criminals and undesirables the tsarist government wanted to get rid of. But all the while, the peasants just kept on farming the land. With the passage of time, the hard toil and harsh conditions of life strengthened the bonds between the newcomers and the Altai, the Yenisei and Lena rivers.

Their humble, godly labors played the decisive role and eventually, Siberia submitted to those who fed her. A century after Yermak, Siberia was providing enough grain for its own population, and a century

later, there was so much grain, the people there didn't know what to do with it all. Oddly enough, one of the main objections put forth by those who opposed the construction of the trans-Siberian railroad in the last century was that the Siberians would use it to flood Russia with their cheap grain, and the Russians had more than enough of their own.

The forging of the final ties between Siberia and Russia, a massive endeavor begun by Yermak with his sword, was completed by the simple peasants with their ploughs. Moreover, Russia conquered Siberia with greater ease than might have been expected. It was sheer luck—quite unbelievable.

We must give Siberia its due. For all its shortcomings—as a result of the constant intrusion of varied and often impure elements, including dishonor, egoism, secretiveness and mutual distrust—it has a distinct breadth of emotion and intellect verging on genuine generosity.

Mikhail Bakunin

If we were to collect all the controversial ideas about Siberians, we would learn that people from other parts of the country are often ecstatic about them and frequently hold much better opinions of Siberians than they do of themselves. This is also in keeping with their character, for they are quicker to exaggerate their shortcomings than their good points. Neither do they conceal their disappointment in their fellow Siberians and native land, for everything could be better and more perfect than it is at present.

Of course, living in quite different natural condi-

tions in a land populated by ethnic groups with cultures diverging widely from their own made the native Siberians distinct from inhabitants of the older parts of Russia. Just as Europeans in America developed into a different breed of men than those who remained behind in the "old country", so Siberians came to be distinct from Russians at large. These differences are expressed in psychological make-up and even physical appearance.

Immediately to the east of the Urals, you begin to see faces with Asiatic traits. Admittedly, from the very beginning, the Russians in Siberia proved superb colonists. True, attempts were made to enslave the local inhabitants, using the example of North America for that purpose. Not only were such ventures unsuccessful: they were woeful failures, condemned by both the tsarist government and local societal opinion, as well as by the way of life, and customs of the vast majority of settlers, who were of simple Russian peasant stock.

As far as the government is concerned, it must be said that in all the serious disagreements which occurred between the Russians and the ethnic minorities, it almost invariably took the side of the latter. That was the case under Peter the Great and Catherine the Great alike. Nevertheless, this did not stop local military governors and their men from mercilessly robbing and humiliating minority groups. But simple souls who lived and worked alongside Buryats and Tunguses with no difficulty quickly developed friendly relations with them. The Russians taught these peoples what they knew about farming and handicrafts, and in exchange, they acquired the others' skills in trapping and fishing, learning much about local conditions and the cycles of nature.

Ordinary Russians thought nothing of intermarriage, for they did not consider themselves in any sense a chosen people. This practice became so common that it gave the government and Orthodox Church cause for concern. In 1622, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Filaret thus admonished Archbishop of Siberia Cyprian: "We have learned from the military governors and from tsarist officials in Siberia that in the Siberian cities, many Russians, civil servants and military officers alike do not observe Christian customs but lead lewd and disgusting lives. Many of them, fearing not the wrath of God, cohabit openly with vile Tatar, Ostyak or Vogul women, while others marry heathen Tatars, thus performing immoral acts..."

The Orthodox Church, by the way, was not terribly consistent in its demands, forbidding mixed marriages on the one hand, and allowing them on the other, if the heathen spouse agreed to adopt Christianity. The rare groups of women sent from the Russian gubernias were far from sufficient to supply all the men there with wives. And moreover, Russian peasants decided how they wanted to live without any advice from outside. So it is not at all surprising that the deeper into the Siberian backwaters one got, the more frequent mixed marriages became, and the more pronounced Asian features on Russian faces. In Eastern Siberia, for example, every third or fourth face has Asian eyes and prominent cheekbones, giving the women, in particular, a fresh beauty, charm, and expressiveness which puts them in a class apart from the worn-out, faded pulchritude so often found in Europe.

This mixture of Slavic impetuosity and spontaneity with Asian naturalness and profundity has resulted in a Siberian character possibly not marked by anything

terribly specific. But it has surely given the Siberian certain features, both positive and negative, such as a keen power of observation, a heightened sense of personal dignity which rejects anything alien or externally imposed, inexplicable changes of mood and an ability to withdraw deep into his innermost self. A Siberian is inclined to extremes: periods of frenzied work alternate with states of utter idleness. In his personality, slight shrewdness stands alongside kindness, but the shrewdness is so obvious, no profit can be had from it. The Siberian as a distinct entity is probably as yet incomplete, for the two sides have not yet merged to form an integrated entity, and Nature certainly demands more time than she has had to finish what has been started. However, she is doubtless carrying out this task with considerable relish.

In speaking of the Russian Siberian's character, it is worth repeating that from the very beginning, it had its origins in runaway serfs and Cossacks. The colonization of Siberia was carried out first and foremost by ordinary people, and the first settlers were those who ventured into that distant land of their own free will long before the government sent its recruits. Therefore, Siberia was first populated by people who sought to escape from all manner of limitations placed on them by religion, society, and the mores of the time. They sought personal freedom and freedom of enterprise. People at odds with the law went there to avoid punishment, while those who sought social justice saw in the unwritten rules of the Siberian settlements a bulwark against the administrative oppression of tsarist law. Individuals who dreamed of finding a place where there were no laws at all also made this vast land their home.

Next to the lawless adventurer strode the righteous,

and alongside honest laborers could be found all manner of rogues. The schism in the Orthodox Church in the 17th century, brought about by Patriarch Nikon's controversial reforms, resulted in the mass migration to Siberia of many thousands of the most stalwart souls with the sternest of characters who refused to accept the religious and civil innovations of the times: they preferred to retreat from this world to the most inaccessible places they could find. Even today, settlements of these Old Believers can be found deep in our forests. In language, customs, traditions, religious belief, and dress, they have remained exactly as they were three hundred years ago. One can be amazed by their fanaticism, but one would be wiser to wonder at their tenacity and firmness, which far exceed the boundaries of our conception of these ideas.

Everything can be found in Siberia—from Old Believers' communities, with their exceedingly strict moral standards, to brotherhoods of thieves exiled for their crimes, which operated according to quite different standards. N. Yadrintsev noted of the Old Believers: "These settlements bear the character of antiquity and display a sense of strength and orderliness precisely because the vast majority of the population in such places consists of Old Believers. No matter what Old Believers' settlement one finds oneself in in Siberia, be it the eastern or western part, the same sense of order and contentment is invariably present. The very visages of the inhabitants are other-worldly, as if they were members of some particular tribe. The beautiful, stout women, fair of skin and pure as the driven snow in their neat, colorful sarafans... The venerable appearance of the old men and the comely youths—everywhere orderliness, cleanliness, and utter contentment."

Even today, other Siberians regard the Old Beli-

evers, with their strong family ties, with special respect and interest, for they are generally true and loyal friends as well as exemplary workers.

There has always been a large flow of people to and from Siberia. There have been times when this land was like a bustling waystation, with the people involved in these migrations behaving accordingly. Much of this feeling remains even today. Thousands of people come to work on the enormous Siberian construction sites—they come in wave after wave with the appropriate noise and impressive might. Then, in a few years, they disappear quietly, almost unnoticed, as if they have been swallowed by shifting desert sands. New waves of construction workers arrive by the thousand, and again, when the work is done, they are washed away by mysterious, lethargic tides that leave behind only a small number from the enormous droves that appeared not so long before. This can be explained first of all by an attitude toward Siberia which has persisted over the centuries: how to exploit its natural wealth most quickly and efficiently. Concern for man's convenience and well-being there has always been of secondary importance and remains several levels lower than elsewhere, given the particular conditions that exist in Siberia. Unfortunately, attempts to raise this level of concern several stages higher than elsewhere to compensate for the inevitable backsliding have not always been successful.

There's no doubt about it: living in Siberia is far from easy. Over the past decade, the climate has become more capricious. There are always lots of surprises in store for us these days: sometimes the icicles begin to melt on New Year's Eve, and the drops resound merrily on roof and pane. Then there

can be a snowfall in June almost as hard as those of mid-winter. The severe climate and lack of comfort in general have always determined the type of colonists and trailblazers who could survive in this land. In order to settle permanently, a person must have the spirit of a true Siberian: not momentary surges of enthusiasm, but a constant state of preparedness for unexpected unpleasant turns of events and an ability to overcome them without wasting excessive energy. This type of spirit is not necessarily Siberian by birth: it can develop any place on earth, but it must conform to the atmosphere and general pace of life. Some families have lived in Siberia for generations, but they have never adapted: they have never become Siberians, and the longer they remain, the more they suffer from life in an alien land. Other people who come to Siberia adapt with no particular problems; these are the types of individuals who will thrive despite all the seeming difficulties. The true Siberian is not just a thick-skinned person who is used to extremely cold weather and a lack of creature comforts, and not only a persistent and stubborn individual who pursues any goal determined by local conditions. Neither must this be accidental but a true ability to become rooted in Siberian soil and feel deeply the ties between himself and the spirit of Nature. The Siberian rarely abandons his native region: the increasingly high rate of mobility which is so common elsewhere in the world and has reached epidemic proportions in some areas is much less noticeable in Siberia. Most people move no farther than to some other part of the area in which they were born. The love of our native land which exists in every one of us from the very beginning is more insistent and passionate in the case of Siberians, perhaps

because our land was won with such great difficulty, a fact which is still fresh in our collective memories.

Without the persistence and stubbornness of which Siberians are so often accused, it would be impossible to exist for long in our harsh land. The first settlers in every village deep in the heart of Siberia literally had to wrest every clump of earth from the taiga. They could not relax their efforts for even a moment, or the forest would immediately begin to encroach upon the strips of land they had claimed from it for farming. The taiga surrounded them like a wall, and far beyond the taiga loomed mountains whose peaks were forever covered with caps of blinding snow. The long winters sapped the settlers' spiritual reserves, and the short summers required a redoubled output of physical strength. In the middle of summer, a hard frost could strike and totally wipe out the crops in the taiga, the fields, and the kitchen gardens. In winter, hungry beasts would prowl the villages, wreaking havoc with the domestic animals and even attacking human beings. In hot weather, the settlers were tormented by midges and mosquitoes. The dreadful gnats were less troublesome than the swarms of miniscule, almost invisible poisonous flies which appeared in bad weather. The livestock, exasperated by the gnats, could be put out to pasture only at night. In the daytime, the animals were kept under sheds where smoke pots burned constantly to keep the insects away. People could barely breathe in the mosquito nets woven of hair they wore over their faces. For additional protection, they smeared tar on their bare skin. All these old problems came down to us: in my childhood, during the 1940s and 1950s, it was impossible to go outside for even a minute in the middle and lower reaches of the Angara without taking all the

necessary precautions. We wore nets and wrapped ourselves in cloth from head to toe so that—God forbid!—not a patch of bare skin remained. We smeared ourselves with tar and stuffed the legs of our boots with grass to close all the exits and entrances. But to no avail: we all had puffy eyes and bloody, swollen strips on our hands and legs where the dreadful insects managed to find a way to our tender skin.

The Italian Somier, who traveled to the far side of the Urals at the end of the last century, wrote: "If Dante had ever journeyed through Siberia, he would have made mosquitoes a new type of torment for the most wretched of his sinners." Two hundred and a hundred years ago and a hundred years since, it seems, the mosquitoes here have changed little. They have adapted better than man to the smoke and fumes and to the rest of the changes in their domain.

In order to stick it out in Siberia, not to throw up one's hands in despair and leave in the face of all these inconveniences, mere physical strength was far from sufficient. A stalwart spirit was just as much of a necessity—a proud soul that would resist the urge to give up, an undiminishing stubbornness that insisted the person was stronger than the obstacles confronting him.

Perhaps God decided to add these disagreeable touches to Siberia at the very end of His creations because, He already had His doubts in Man. Thus, seeing the harsh distances spread out before him, the Siberian might have thought at the time, standing in proud dejection before this vision.

One more ill must be added to the daily lives of Siberians of the past: vagrants. Siberia is well known as a place of exile and penal servitude to which all and sundry were sent for major and minor infractions

of the law in the vast and ill-organized Russian Empire. This was considered to be an effective way of increasing the small population of the area. For some reason, it was a common idea (perhaps because criminals never wrote memoirs) that only political prisoners were exiled to Siberia. However, this was far from the case. By the way, Siberia benefited greatly from all the political prisoners who were sent there, beginning with the Decembrists in the 19th century, all the way to the Marxists and Bolsheviks of later years. Doubtless, those who were exiled to this distant land hardly considered themselves terribly lucky. But for Siberia it was quite a good thing, despite the circumstances, because in those distant years, their enormous contribution to the sciences, culture and mores of our land, served as a catalyst for the development of the human personality in our unenlightened and little-known part of the world. The presence of the exiled Decembrists alone had such a great effect on the public that although they were scattered over the vast expanses of Western and Eastern Siberia, they aided greatly the consolidation of public opinion and the creation of a sense of community which eventually led to the founding of Tomsk University.

However, the vast majority of those exiled to Siberia were common criminals. In some places, there were more of them than there were ordinary inhabitants. And obviously, they could not teach any trades other than the anti-social ones they already knew. They had an ill effect on the land, but it was not so much a matter of the disintegration of moral values, for the average Siberian was sturdy enough to resist such urges. The major problem was that many of these criminals became vagrants after escaping from penal colonies or serving their time. There was no

way of keeping close watch over all these criminals, and it was much easier for them to escape than to survive along the way thereafter. Therefore, an escaped convict was prepared to do anything in order to survive: to rob, steal, or kill if he had to. Now, when we sing the lament of the poor run-away convict who "went to Lake Baikal and took a fishing boat", we feel pity for him. But our ancestors' bitter tears were hardly tears of pity. They had to arm themselves not only to fight off wild beasts but also to protect themselves and their families from just such desperate individuals who might appear at the window at any moment and demand anything they wanted. In light of this fact, the distrustfulness and reserve of the Siberian is hardly surprising. No wonder he may seem unfriendly and cold at first glance. But that is only until he has had a chance to take a look at you and see what kind of guest you are. As soon as he is sure you will bring no harm to him or his family, he will open his heart to you. Then, that very person who seemed on the verge of turning you out of his house, will treat you like his long-lost brother and kill the fatted calf in your honor. This hospitality will be proffered without any unnecessary display of emotions, but it will display all the elements of warmth and sincerity which should be part of the joy one person can bring another in this world.

The legends of Siberian hospitality, though perhaps somewhat exaggerated, have enough basis in fact to warrant their appearance and continuation.

The invariably small villages and settlements along the river were few and far between. The inhabitants all knew each other well, so after long lonely periods of trapping in the taiga or at harvest time, the Siberians grew hungry for the sight of a new face and

eagerly awaited the news he would bring. The appearance of some unfamiliar soul in the village was a real holiday. Moreover, the Siberians' relations to their neighbors and fellow-villagers were no joking matter, but were quite serious, indeed. They generally didn't waste their time and energy on petty disagreements and offenses, but developed real friendships. And if they were at enmity with someone or other, then they were just as serious about that. Relations with others were never a light-hearted matter for Siberians.

It was harder to get along in Siberia than elsewhere without helping each other. The resulting community spirit which developed thrived, remarkably enough, alongside the reserve and individualism which were just as necessary for survival. The one characteristic came to the fore when Siberians were dealing with a world which was familiar and comprehensible to them, while all that was alien (and Siberia abounded in such) was regarded with reserve and suspicion. When a trapper left his winter hut in the taiga, he always made sure there was a supply of dry kindling, matches, salt, and food in case someone had need of shelter. That law of the taiga was observed without exception for centuries and has only just started to break down. For the very vagrants at the hands of whom the old Siberians suffered so much, when they were locking up the house at night, they never forgot to leave a clay pot of milk and a loaf of bread on a special ledge on the window. This was a sign to the traveller to eat and drink if he desired and move on. This custom developed first out of sympathy for the odd wayfarer, and then came to be seen as a means of preserving one's household from evil. Moreover, it was common practice to hand over one's last kopeck to avoid misfortune when strangers, their eyes avert-

ed, went about from city to city, settlement, to settlement, house to house, and cottage to cottage collecting money "for the escape of a friend".

But Siberia itself, as the land and world in which the Siberian lived, had the biggest effect of all on his character. After all, he breathed its very air every day; it was his homeland, the place he was born and raised. As the country is reflected in a people's character, so one's native region is reflected in the personality of the individual.

We can be overwhelmed only by that greatness and might which sharply and artificially sticks out like a sore thumb from the rest, making all comparisons crude and depressing. When everything around us in nature is proportional, albeit on a massive scale, this elevates the human being as well. The genetics of the earth is just as aboriginal and definite as that of the blood. In light of the majesty of Nature and its unrelenting creativity, the person involuntarily felt significant and mighty. The fact that Siberia was sparsely populated increased this reaction. The enormous energy it took to survive and make a home for oneself in this harsh land taught a person to regard himself with respect, as an entity of no less value, and perhaps even more, than everything around him. The whole world surrounding him breathed of an austere untrammelled worth, of mighty secrets hidden deep within. But a tremendous tension lay coiled within that seeming outer calm, and naturally, the Siberian adopted this spirit. If we add to this the freedom-loving traditions of his ancestors, we can conclude that his spirit is probably a bit too indomitable. It is not true that the Siberian is unsociable; but with his equals, this sociability is competitive, and with his inferiors, patronizing. Neither of these roles are inten-

tional: both appear without any deliberateness on his part. But the Siberian never forgets that he is a Siberian, and he reminds others of it as well. Pride in his origins approaches hubris. Of course, this quality is much less pronounced than it once was, but it has not disappeared altogether.

Another important factor to keep in mind is that serfdom never existed in Siberia at all, though it was abolished in Russia only in 1861. This form of feudalistic near-slavery oppressed the individual physically and morally, depriving him of independence and influencing his attitude toward work and life in general. The Siberian was accustomed to being totally self-reliant. There was plenty of land for the taking: anyone could farm as much of it as he was able. Administrative hassles were minimal outside the cities, for rules and regulations were weakened considerably by the time they filtered down to the villages. The morass of insipid regulations the experienced farmer was in no hurry to carry out were almost ineffective. Everyone took quite seriously the old Russian saying: "God helps those who help themselves", for it was applied directly and most practically in Siberia. Needless to say, the Siberian was neither particularly contemplative nor deeply religious (with the obvious exception of the Old Believers). A practical mind-set controlled his feelings plain and simple, not from cupidity or thought of gain but simply due to the harsh dictates of life in those days. It would be odd to seek in this stern soul, tempered by constant resistance and deprivation, that had endured "trial by fire", so to speak, the softness and relaxed nature common in inhabitants of the Russian steppes. But this is not to the Siberian's credit: it is simply an honest assessment of his character. He raised his head to the fir-

mament, as if to some mighty neighbor, dreaming of harnessing the skies for his own purposes.

We could well say that all the characteristics of the Siberian, both good and bad, are what develop in a person who remains long untrammled by all the limitations generally imposed by a legal code.

While considering the Siberian a special breed of Russian who developed due to a process of selection and local conditions, we must not forget that Siberians occupy an enormous territory and come from various social groups. If only for this reason, they could not be all of a single type. A resident of the Altai coming from stern Old Believer stock and someone from the land beyond Lake Baikal whose ancestors were prisoners sent to work in the mines, or a direct descendent of the free Cossacks from the banks of the Yenisei will bear very little resemblance to each other. So all attempts to delineate the general and common characteristics of Siberians are approximations at best.

In fact, the one claim which can be made with absolute veracity is that the very nature of both Siberia and Siberians is that they cannot be characterized fully and to the end: the enigma which makes them unique will always remain.

A saying we repeat often and not without pride is: "Siberia is more Russian than Russia herself."

This old adage cannot possibly raise any objections. Siberia and Russia form a single whole; Siberia does not exist without Russia, and this is so obvious it needs no proof. Here, we are dealing with another matter entirely. Perhaps it is false patriotism, or maybe we are just prejudiced, but it seems that the Siberians have better preserved some traditional Russian traits which are more prominent in their person-

alities. Of course, we cannot take the credit for this ourselves: that's just the way things worked out. There is the distinct possibility that our feelings are quite justified. In the last century, it was noted that Siberian peasants were similar to the Russians of old before the appearance of bondage, villeinage, and serfdom. In Siberia, the natural characteristics of the Russian tiller of the soil were able to develop unimpeded.

We should recall in this context that all the foreign influences, be they German or French, which periodically swept through the Russian capitals like so many wild fires, when they finally made their way to the distant Siberian towns of Tomsk or Irkutsk by horse-drawn carriage invariably filtered through the staid Siberian consciousness and eventually emerged in the local dialect, their forms altered considerably. Perhaps it is due to the traditional mistrustfulness of the Siberian that he was not quick to obey successive lists of instructions without first determining whether they made sense. If we examine the Siberian carefully, we will see that some of the traditional features have disappeared from his character in the past decade, but he still believes in healthy morals and sincere relations with others, which at present is no mean accomplishment. But most important: a Russian (like any other person who is well aware of his national character) feels totally Russian and entirely human only in midst of the natural surroundings in which he grew up, and he feels absolutely lost when these ties are broken. In Siberia, at least, he can still live amongst his native steppes and forests...

It goes without saying that the present-day Siberian bears little resemblance to his ancestors of even a hundred years ago. The "special Siberian breed" of

men who once lived here has been much diluted, and it seems that soon, the concept of a "Siberian" will be transformed into something merely geographical. Everything which occurred in the region's history had a definite effect on the inhabitants' characters: penal servitude and exile; the resettlement of peasants from Russia following the reform of 1861 which continued until the beginning of World War I, led to the migration of four million people to Siberia—a number almost equal to its entire population at that point. Only the strong and stern sense of ethics of Siberia and the help of Mother Nature could make Siberians of all these people over the course of many decades. We must not forget that when the new settlers arrived to make a permanent home for themselves in Siberia, like it or not, they had to consider the local laws—both written and unwritten. However, when, twenty or thirty years ago, a new attempt to "tame" Siberia began, and massive waves of construction workers arrived, they did not have to face this obstacle. Young people flocked here to gain experience in the building trades and earn money for their families. When their jobs were done, they were free to leave. More often than not, they did just that. And they still do. It is entirely possible that those who leave have warm feelings for Siberia which they take back home with them. But at their places of work, they seem to have a lackadaisical, casual, careless attitude, entirely divorced from the land where they are working temporarily and which will never be home to them.

This could not but effect life in Siberia.

In the face of these hordes of seasonal and temporary workers, native Siberians have had to withdraw even more than usual. They keep on farming the land, building, mining, and logging. In the long run, the

fruits of their labors, in terms of the enormous transformations taking place in Siberia, are much greater than what one might suspect from reading the newspapers and magazines, which are accustomed to choosing their heroes from among those alien to this place. But the native Siberians are performing these humble tasks inconspicuously, as if following in the wake of the large-scale economic and industrial drive underway there. Due to their feelings and sense of duty, they seem almost instinctively to choose those places of work and tasks which will benefit their native land the most in the long run.

In city and village alike, the modern Siberian has changed a great deal. But nonetheless, he remains a Siberian and regrets the loss of those features which once made him so unique (as an example of this, we can cite the heroes of Vasily Shukshin's¹ films and novels). He truly needs these features for they are the wellspring of his strength and hopes for the future. What is precisely most encouraging and hopeful is that he will cherish the kernel of the past in him with the stubbornness and persistence of his ancestors.

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It was not so easy to create Siberia as it would have been in a less god-forsaken place.

Ivan Goncharov

The wild and freezing expanses of Siberia!..
How long ago were these words pronounced for

¹ *Vasily Shukshin* (1929-1974) – Russian writer, cinema director, and actor. Posthumous Laureate of the Lenin Prize (1976). – *Ed.*

the first time? Were they said by some actual individual, or have they always been suspended silently and imperiously, like some spirit hovering over Siberia, descending upon the wayfarer in the guise of a feeling of melancholy and alarm? If these words were ever actually spoken, were they intoned by some traveller experiencing a moment of awe before setting off to conquer the vast distances that lay ahead, knowing that many trials awaited him. Perhaps this solitary traveller crossed the Urals and paused for a moment at the border post covered with the parting words of those unfortunate souls sentenced to penal servitude in Siberia, or simply of those who were sure that nothing good awaited them in the days ahead. Then this traveller moved on, but now under the impression of those melancholy phrases. This would invariably increase his personal sadness for some time. As he slowly covered mile after exhausting mile, the same doleful, lifeless scenery passed before his weary eyes, and the rough road seemed like the road to hell. Along this same road moved columns of miserable souls—prisoners or settlers seeking their fortunes, ragged and frightened to death. As if this weren't enough, some red-faced oncoming rowdy would shout imprecations for no reason at all. It would surely seem that here, everything was the opposite of the normal world—that he had entered some kingdom of evil, a godforsaken, alien place which would never be warm or gentle, and which no one could imagine as a desirable homeland for anyone on earth.

Our traveller would continue on his way in this desolate mood for a day or two, or maybe even three. But then, despite his despondent reflections, he would notice one day that the sparse forest which had lined the road had been replaced by a steppe

which also remained monotonous for a long time and seemed endless and incapable of evoking warmth. The steppe had simply to be endured in expectation of what would follow, in hopes that some new scenery, perhaps even more bleak than what had preceded it, might offer some relief to his weary eyes.

And indeed, it happened in the end. Awaking as if from a sound sleep, our traveller suddenly noticed with surprise and joy that the sparse copses which had so bored him had been replaced by more frequent patches of pine and larch emerging boldly along the edges of impassable forest, and the earth itself was gradually becoming less flat. All this began to excite him more and more. He felt increasingly clearly the presentiment of some preordained meeting. He could no longer understand how he had gazed so indifferently at everything around him. How could he have been untouched for so long by scenery of such rare beauty? What had been wrong with him?

At the end of the last century, Anton Chekhov crossed Siberia on his way to Sakhalin; he was bored all the way to the Yenisei. "Cold plains, gnarled birches, tiny ponds, an occasional lake, snow in May, and the bare depressing banks of the Ob's tributaries. That is absolutely all I remember of the first fifteen hundred miles." He had no kind words for the ladies either: "The women here are just as boring as the scenery." But when he reached the Yenisei, he was awed: "...I have never in my life seen a river more magnificent than the Yenisei." He continued his journey with renewed delight in the gloom of the endless taiga and the old-timers' tales of hunting and life in this wild country.

Another Russian writer, Ivan Goncharov, made it to Siberia forty years before Chekhov as he was near-

ing the end of a journey around the world. He began this trans-Siberian journey from the opposite side, from the Sea of Okhotsk after feasting his eyes on the rich and opulent beauty of the tropics and the exotic sights of China and Japan. At first, he could hardly bear the vast icy expanses of Northeastern Asia, but not far from the Lena, he was won over as well. Even though it was frozen solid and covered with snow, though it was completely lifeless at that time of year, the mighty river awoke in that tired traveller a fresh feeling of delight and comprehension with which, calling himself a romantic, he continued his journey.

This is exactly what should have happened in both cases. No matter what direction Siberia is approached from, this land is not quick to reveal itself. The finest creations are hidden with love and good taste deep in Siberia's heartland. This brings up another matter altogether: what can be considered finest of all in this vast land? On this point, no two people are of the same opinion. Since I live in Central Siberia, I consider, next to Lake Baikal, that the Sayany range and Yenisei River are the most beautiful. However, someone from the Altai will affirm that this region is the most wonderful; to the Chukchi, nothing could be more lovely than the shores of the cold northern seas. We each favor the places where we were born and raised, for all Siberians are by nature fervent patriots. However, we are speaking now not of local people's opinions but of a general one, preferably an unprejudiced view of Siberia as a land created by Mother Nature.

I am more than certain that the very same scenery which seemed utterly boring and left our traveller indifferent would be so transformed on the return journey as to seem unrecognizable. The landscapes

would seem so appropriate and magnetic and have such a strong effect on his esthetic feelings that he would surely look around in disbelief, certain he had taken a different road before. But no, the road is exactly the same one, and the scenery is no different. The only alterations will have been brought about by the changing seasons. The difference here is in the traveller himself: he is no longer the same person, for he has been to Siberia. He has seen a great deal which was beyond his imagination, and these impressions of Siberia have opened up some new and glorious expanses deep within him—depths the existence of which he never before suspected.

Siberia does not amaze or surprise a person at once: it draws him closer unhurriedly, as if against its own will, with precise economy of effort. But once Siberia has drawn a person into its charmed circle, the ties formed subsequently are lasting. Siberia becomes a passion so strong it is almost like an illness. After being in Siberia for a while, no matter where a person goes, he will feel crowded, gloomy, and mournful, experiencing a tormenting lack he can't quite put his finger on—an inner lack as if he has left some indefinable part of himself in Siberia forever.

Everything in Siberian nature is mighty and untrammelled, and the major scenic attractions are different than those which can be seen in other places. If it is a plain in Western Siberia, it is always the largest and flattest on the entire planet. The swamp there seems endless, even when viewed from an airplane. The Eastern Siberian taiga is as large as a continent, and it has tolerated one misfortune after another in the form of forest fires and logging. The Ob, Yenisei, and Lena rivers can be compared only with each other. Lake Baikal contains one-fifth of all

the fresh water on the planet. Everything here was created with great forethought and considerable generosity, starting from the Pacific Ocean and moving westward. It was as if the Almighty in fact began His creation of the Earth from the Pacific Ocean, sparing neither effort nor material. Only after Siberia was completed did He realize there might not be enough to go around, so the scrimping and economizing began.

So far, we have spoken only of sizes and volumes, without even beginning to praise the natural beauty of Siberia. And is it really possible to say anything worthy of such an amazing phenomenon as Lake Baikal? Any comparisons or words will be merely a pale, distorted shadow of the real thing. If it were not for the mighty Sayany range nearby, which is fully on a par with Lake Baikal, and the Lena whose source is not far away, and the Angara, which takes water from Lake Baikal to the Yenisei, we might be tempted to think, while standing on the shores of this miraculous lake and gazing at all the visible contours and the pure water, or at its lovely hues and illumination from above—a vision overpowering enough to make the sensitive soul faint dead away—that Lake Baikal had fallen to Earth quite by chance from some other planet—a richer and happier one where it existed in full accord with the local inhabitants.

Identical feelings are evoked by Lake Teletskoye in the Altai, a mountainous region which is often compared to Switzerland in natural beauty. And the comparison is just, because here, nature runs riot, ruling omnipotently over all. Seemingly embarrassed by its great heights—not above sea level, but above the level of human perception—it graciously descends, bearing its riches with regal ease, that they might ring out and invigorate mankind like divine sounds within

the range of the visible world. Perhaps it was not by chance that here in the Altai, for two centuries in a row, Russians sought the mysterious land of Byelovodye¹, an earthly paradise where, according to legend, total happiness could be found. They searched for this country, and in their estimation, they found it. So settlers arrived from European Russia, the Urals, and Siberia to farm the fertile plains. There was something special about this place which caused people to regard it with particular hope. Indeed, this could well have been an earthly paradise, but it was ruined by man who took his habits, laws and regulations wherever he went, no matter how farflung the place.

Minusinsk Region on the southern border of Western and Eastern Siberia in the Krasnoyarsk area is also referred to as a Siberian Switzerland. Goodness knows how it happened, but it is as if a warm, cozy nook of Switzerland or Southern Europe wound up here by some twist of fate. All around is plain old ordinary Siberia, but in the Minusinsk basin, to everyone's amazement, grow watermelons, honeydews, and tomatoes as enormous as any in the much-touted South.

By the way, many such un-Siberian places are scattered throughout our vast land. There is a section of Lake Baikal along the Snezhnaya River where alongside larches and cedars, grow enormous ancient poplars and blue spruce. But it's better not to touch upon the topic of Lake Baikal, for there are simply too many things, from the simplest of plants to the largest of animals which exist there and nowhere else. Or if they are found here as well as elsewhere, then it is in defiance of all the existing laws of nature.

¹*Byelovodye*—the Russian for “white water”.—Ed.

No one can explain these mysteries. Scientists continue to make discoveries and are in a constant state of amazement. Not everyone knows, for example, that there are marvelous places on Lake Baikal where there are more sunny days in a year than at the famous southern resorts. (Not long ago, I read in a very respectable publication that Irkutsk boasts the second largest number of sunny days per year in the world after Davos, Switzerland.) The water in Lake Baikal itself is always icy cold, even in summer, but in the gulfs, it reaches temperatures of over 20°C. Perhaps all these explainable and inexplicable but happy exceptions exist for the express purpose of prompting man as to what he should do and how he should transform Siberia if this vast land should seem miserly or uninhabitable.

Like everything else in Siberia—the people, the land, and the climate—nature differs a great deal from place to place as well. Imagine the enormous distances involved, and that will give some idea of the variety of landscapes found in Siberia. Only in winter is everything fairly uniform—covered with a vast layer of ice and snow, locked in the heavy embrace of inaccessible meditation. The white plains lay bare and frozen. The distant mountains tower skyward like frontier posts, bending under the weight of the snow. The taiga dozes like a bas-relief of hoarfrost, its lakes and rivers covered with ice. Everything is withdrawn deep into itself, bewitched by the cold. At this time of year, it is easy to understand how legends might arise not only of people who hibernated in winter but also of words that froze in mid-air without reaching their destinations, thawing out only in spring and resounding in empty space, far from the person who spoke them and then moved on.

It is easy to find oneself in such a mood in Siberia.

Spring in these parts is not spring as we are accustomed to think of it, but is rather a good two months of shaking off the snows of winter. The temperature rises and drops below freezing time and again, until finally, in the end, warmth wins out, driving the coldness away. Then snow and ice melt in a rush, and everything bursts into bloom almost literally overnight. Plants and trees all around race to don their dazzling greenery. In the northern reaches of Siberia, spring is transformed immediately into summer: only yesterday, the land was completely bare and in the grips of winter. Just the slightest hint of changes to come hung in the air. Today, almost without warning, buds and shoots of green appear everywhere simultaneously. Tomorrow, the short-lived summer will be in full bloom. No one can get enough of its intense beauty, for the summer is as fleeting and ephemeral as the winter is long. There is a note of desperation about it all, for by the very beginning of August, the fast-approaching autumn is already making itself felt. The Siberian summer is hard-pressed by the cold spring on the one hand and the overpowering autumn on the other. But for all that, the autumns are long and peaceful. Of course, the weather is unpredictable here, too, and there is the occasional fleeting autumn as well. But more often than not, the falls come early and stay late, giving all that lives and endures in nature time to catch its breath and bask in the sun. Not rarely, it happens that the unseasonal warmth of these lovely autumn days tricks the plants, and they put out buds for the second time that year. Then the mountain slopes are covered with blossoms of wild rosemary, one of our favorite bushes, though it is gnarled and not particularly striking. However, its selfless, unpre-

tentious violet or pinkish blossoms bring joy to every heart. The forests burn for what seems like an infinity with all the vivid, passionate autumn hues imaginable. And at this particular time, the air is purer than ever, glimmering in the sunlight, and filling the soul with gentle delight.

Such words as "burn", "blaze", "glow", and "flame" are so often used to describe the forests here in autumn not out of an attraction for the fire-fighter's lexicon, but because they are utterly appropriate to the phenomenon described. In Siberia, Mother Nature is not content with the lazy, voluptuous beauty of southern climes. Here, she must rush to blossom and bear fruit, and this she does with calculated impetuosity and short-lived but vivid solemnity. We have a type of flower which grows only in our part of the world, and we call it "tongues of fire". In July, when the taiga's meadows are in a blaze of red, nothing can shake the universal impression that they actually give off heat.

So our land can be characterized by impetuosity at one time of the year and sluggishness at another, as well as by irregular, unpredictable transitions from one state to another. Impetuosity and stupefaction, openness and mysteriousness, vividness and reserve, bounty and obscurity—all these concepts do not relate to Nature alone, but are part and parcel of Siberia as well. Reflecting upon these two, almost diametrically opposed sources, and remembering how vast, varied, and complex a land Siberia is, one can hardly restrain himself from answering its call! Siberia!..

Today, this word has too many meanings; it is too emotionally charged for clarity.

There is always the desire to make of this enormous, complex knot of conceptions, of contradictory hopes and aspirations a magical pearl, a certitude

which is simple and clear to one and all: in a century or two, a person who approaches the shores of Lake Baikal will be riveted to the spot by its unparalleled pulchritude and pure depths. In a hundred or even two hundred years, Siberia will remain Siberia—a habitable land of virgin forests and mighty, untamed rivers—not a lifeless lunar landscape with the sparse remnants of petrified trees.

In every spiritually developed individual, the marks of his homeland can always be found. Not by any choice of our own, we bear within ourselves the antiquity of Kiev,¹ the greatness of Novgorod,² the pain of Ryazan,³ the holiness of Optina Pustyn Monastery,⁴ and the eternal glory of Yasnaya Polyana⁵ and Staraya Russa.⁶ The dates of our victories

¹*Kiev*—an ancient Russian city which was the capital of Kievan Rus from the beginning of the 9th to the 13th century. It was sacked by the Mongol-Tatar invaders in 1240.—*Ed.*

²*Novgorod*—known from 859 A. D. Successfully repelled the attacks of the Swedish and Lithuanian feudal lords in the 13th-15th cent. United with the Russian State as a result of the campaigns of Ivan III.—*Ed.*

³*Optina Pustyn Monastery*—founded not far from Moscow in the 14th cent. The retreat nearby (founded in 1821) was visited by Gogol, Dostoyevsky, and Lev Tolstoy.—*Ed.*

⁴*Ryazan*—an old Russian city which put up a heroic resistance to Khan Batu in the 13th cent.—*Ed.*

⁵*Yasnaya Polyana*—the estate of Lev Tolstoy. Here, he was born and lived for almost sixty years, writing many of his most famous works on the premises. The estate was made into a museum in 1921.—*Ed.*

⁶*Staraya Russa*—a city in Novgorod region where Dostoyevsky spent his summers from 1876 to 1881.—*Ed.*

and defeats are emblazoned in our minds like the Biblical burning bush. And in this sense, we have long experienced Siberia as a reality of the future, as a dependable and imminent stage in our inevitable rise. We have only a vague idea of what spiritual heights man might eventually reach from chance glimpses at the contours of a possible future, but we can be sure that life will be quite different when men cease to engage in unnecessary and harmful endeavors learned from the bitter experience of recent years and begin at last, not in words but in deeds, to show true concern for the wonderful planet they have inherited.

Only when this occurs will Siberia attain its fulfillment. Such is the image of the future Siberian who will inhabit a youthful and stalwart region which indeed has the right to its unique future.

TIME FOR CONCERN

Excerpts from Valentin Rasputin's Address at the Sixth Congress of the Writers' Union of the RSFSR in 1986

Twenty years ago, Yuri Kazakov¹ wrote his well-known article "A Writer's Courage" in which he described the particular kind of courage demanded of the practitioners of our profession: a ceaseless courage which took no holidays or vacations. Kazakov spoke of this in his day not in praise of himself and his colleagues or in hopes of winning from readers an additional portion of respect which had been earned but not received. He mentioned it to remind the writer of his special, far from easy role in society and of his grave responsibility to literature. I have returned to this topic not so that we can exclaim together, "Oh, what brave souls we all are!", for at present, it takes a lot of courage just to live. Rather I have cited Kazakov and clothed the writer of the mid-'80s in this attractive garb in an attempt to understand what has changed in our role and responsibility since the '60s when my peers and I were just beginning our careers as writers.

¹ *Yuri Kazakov* (1927-1982)—Soviet writer, a master of emotional, lyrical prose. His short stories are included in all anthologies of contemporary Soviet prose.—*Ed.*

Now, as twenty years ago, courage is demanded of the writer most of all when he is alone, face to face with the blank sheet of paper before him. There are no torments more difficult to bear and no courage more lofty. No one can help him in the least: neither friends nor spouse, past successes, or professional skill. In any other field, if a person has sufficient skill and experience, half the battle is won. But not so in writing. In our field, all the books you and everyone else have ever written are in opposition to the one you are writing at the moment. This is expressed most of all in the fear of repeating yourself or others, of saying what has already been said, of discovering what has already been discovered, of involuntarily repeating lines of thought and images—stylistic, linguistic, problematic, etc.—which have already been dealt with in literature. The more works a writer produces, the more difficult each successive one becomes. Falling back on stereotypes or solutions which have been successful in the past is one's worst enemy in creative work.

The writer never loses his sense of helplessness in the face of the blank piece of paper. His courage consists in his ability to transform that helplessness into strength. Only strength born of doubts and weaknesses which has traversed the whole tortuous path from a simple to a brilliant thought can be of any real assistance here.

Twenty years is a long time in terms of individual human existence. If we measure these two decades in three generations—grandfathers, fathers, and grandsons—then in this span of time, the grandfathers have departed, the grandsons have become fathers, and a new generation has appeared in the wake of those who have gone before. Life has advanced and become

more complicated. Both quantitative and qualitative changes have occurred. The reader of today differs from the one of twenty years ago. He is seeking new spiritual and moral ground which has not yet been covered in literature. In terms of ethics, which is always one of the main topics here, he is looking not for some code of conduct measured in pluses or minuses but for something broader and more profound which cannot be confined by the earlier boundaries assigned it... Nothing is more suited to make these discoveries, to awaken these profounder feelings, and to prepare the soil for this ethical expansion than art!

To give a literary hero a multi-faceted, active, exciting personality rather than a cheap, jingling, pre-packaged set of positive features which can in no way serve as an example, and to make sure that this personality is inspiring and illuminating, the author must look deeper into his creation to see what his hero is lacking and where; he must know how to search for the innermost elements that are missing.

Talent and patience are not enough, likewise a pure heart and good intentions. As never before, staunchness, maturity, and a thorough understanding of the society in which he lives are demanded of a writer...

It is not true that literature can only pose questions without providing any answers, although the latter may not always be necessary, because the moral formulation of the question contains within itself the delineation of a moral solution. It is equally the case that an amoral formulation will invariably result in an amoral resolution. However, it is in the tradition of Russian letters to speak one's mind to the bitter end. The "village prose" of the '60s and '70s was heavily criticized in the beginning, and endless attempts were

made to rub its face in the deep mud which has been the bane of Russian villages for centuries. This was done out of a fear that the "village writers" would somehow manage to spread a thick layer of that mud over the relatively clean asphalt of our city streets, thus soiling our new urban way of life. However, the "village prose" has in some sense repaid the debt we owe our native Russia, not just by eulogizing it but by showing with grateful living memories what our national spirit has brought from the hoary past and what has made us strong. It pointed out the moral and spiritual values we must retain if we wish, in the future, to remain a people rather than a mere nondescript population inhabiting a vast territory.

Another great service has been rendered by the literature about World War II. Perhaps it has not yet told the whole truth about the war, but it has certainly succeeded in telling the truth about man at war and naming the bulwark which supported our soldiers in the inhuman and superhuman trials they were called upon to face. This bulwark was their homeland, inviolable in its natural and historical legacy and in terms of human fate. The images of their homes—from the Volga to the Angara, the Dnieper, Sukhona and Ob rivers—were as mighty a weapon as their armaments and ideological convictions.

The main thing which has been reconquered by the poems and prose about World War II is the twenty million Soviet lives lost in various countries and lands. Their resurrection as literary characters reveals the essence of what they sacrificed for their homeland.

I speak now of "village prose" and the theme of the war in Soviet literature simply because over the last twenty plus years, they have strode boldly forth, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, confirming the

inalienable principles of the physical and spiritual well-being of society. This does not mean other genres have not confirmed the same principles, for the basic aspirations of literature are one and the same. But it seems to me that the most passionate and sincere voices in this united choir, singing an unspoiled melody in the same unspoiled tongue, were precisely these two. They stated the most important and essential messages for the reader over the past twenty years. And it seemed to us that they were not late in coming—or at least that their tardiness was not tragic.

In 1963, Vladimir Chivilikhin wrote his *The Pearl of Siberia*, which rang out like an alarm bell, warning of a new and previously unheard of danger for our country which we had not noticed before because the threat was coming not from without but from within. Thus, the struggle to save Lake Baikal began. At about the same time, Sergei Zalygin started his one-man campaign against the plans to build a hydroelectric power station on the lower reaches of the Ob. If this project had been carried out, an enormous area of low-lying lands and swamps in the north of Western Siberia would have been needlessly flooded. Mikhail Sholokhov also spoke out in defense of Lake Baikal. Unfortunately this campaign was not entirely successful...

But Zalygin achieved what he set out to do. His writing, endless visits to officials, invincible convictions, and the logic of artist and scientist combined enabled him to prove the bankruptcy of the project for the construction of the Lower Ob Hydroelectric Power Station. His victory gave us all hope that selfless work in the name of one's homeland was never in vain. What those tireless efforts cost him is something only Zalygin knows...

Twenty years hence, we have confirmed human ideals on this imperfect earth, justly supposing that if literature can teach anything, then it is not how to act, but with what to act—with emotion, honor, and a sense of duty. For literature governs not concrete actions but inner desires and impulses, remembering that much of man's material existence is a result of his spiritual life. The writer could depict the inner desires and impulses of a particular human being, but he could not always explain them. Perhaps they were not always comprehensible or predictable, but they were not terribly dangerous. When they became totally uncontrollable, and the individual for whose soul we were so concerned revealed to us not a human soul but a mere turbine grinding out assembly-line patriotic sentiments of dubious quality, then it was time for literature to choke on its own admonitions.

We were engaged in the endless, extremely delicate and painstaking task of improving and increasing the depth of that world and homeland which the human being contains as spiritual substances and which bespeak his historical growth. The land where we live seems eternal to us. We confirm our eternal values upon this land, or even above it, as it were, but it is so vast and so great that our chief treasure was often incomprehensible to our limited imaginations. Our land was part of us, and we were eternally her children—good, bad, or indifferent—but our land was always with us, and that seemed sufficient. However, now it is becoming increasingly evident that our land is facing a grave danger, not as a spiritual concept or the sum of our patriotic feelings, but as the refuge of our people, the place where we realize our purpose on Earth.

People everywhere are concerned about the fate of

our Russian lands: there has never been anywhere such a gargantuan scheme as reversing the direction of the current of the Siberian rivers. The human being is our concern, and no one has relieved us writers of this responsibility. But if the earth which has been cultivated by generations of our ancestors and has become sacred to us is to be the site of such radical experimentation—as if on totally worthless territories of no use to anyone—should not we turn our attention to this matter before it is too late?..

It would be unjust to accuse our writers of total silence on this point. The late Fyodor Abramov was extremely concerned for the fate of the entire north of our vast country until his final hour. Again and again, Sergei Zalygin speaks out convincingly and authoritatively. Vasily Belov makes his concern known both orally and in writing. A humanist of our time, Academician Dmitry Likhachyov, appeals to our memories and our filial duty. Other voices are heard, but they almost always speak in such allegorical language that opponents hardly take the trouble to decipher. But these voices are few and far between. If literature is truly interested in the results of its efforts, it does not have the right to brush this matter aside...

In literature, there is no ungratifying work, and Russian literature has always, in all places and at all times, responded first and foremost to the needs of our homeland.

By no means am I appealing to anyone to give up writing fiction, to abandon the heavenly sounds of our wonderful Russian language or the other diverse national languages of the Soviet Union in favor of documentary or journalistic accounts of the serious problems facing our country. Each of us has his own

place in the common ground of literature—the place where he can be of most use. However, if we imagine this common ground not abstractly but in concrete terms, we will realize that we are speaking of Mother Russia. There is no word more dear to us Russian writers than Russia, this land to which all our fates are linked so inextricably. Only those who love their native land can respect other countries—but this is so perfectly obvious to all of us that it is hardly worth mentioning. If we want new Pushkins and Fets, Turgenevs and Bunins, Prishvins, Kazakovs, and Nosovs—true bards of the natural beauty of Russia and the Russian soul—to appear in our literature in the future, might it not be worth our while today collectively to turn our attention to both the conservation of nature and the preservation of the human soul? It will certainly do no harm to us as writers...

...In conclusion, I wish to return to that with which I began: to the fact that courage is indeed necessary in our profession, first and foremost when the writer is completely alone, locked in struggle with himself. Every book is a victory in such a struggle. But a victory for whom? It is either a victory for the martyr who has searched for and found each word with enormous effort so that honor and truth shine forth in a unified inscription of pen and fate, or for a mere expert in stringing synonyms together—something any writer can become the instant he loses his national identity and sense of civic responsibility.

One of the main characteristics of a writer is his courage. And this courage is formed of his fundamental and profound understanding of his homeland throughout its history. This understanding is the essence of the writer's sensitive, suffering soul and

finds expression in his work. We writers take upon ourselves the strengths and pains of Russia; we possess her words and boundless spirit. No particular courage is required to live in the land of one's birth with the blessing of that land. Courage is needed, not to remain silent, but to speak honestly and openly about the serious problems facing this country of ours.

LITERATURE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR EVERYTHING...

An interview with TV reporter Tatyana Zemskova

...“The emotions called forth by one’s homeland are both remarkable and inexpressible... What inordinate joy and sweet longing they give when they come to us during times of separation or happy moments of revelation which resonate in our souls. A person who in ordinary life hears little and does not see very far receives the sharpest sense of hearing and sight at that magical hour. And these heightened perceptions allow him to soar to the most distant corners of his native land and to delve deep into its history. A person cannot get a firm footing in life or find fulfilment as a human being without a feeling of closeness to the deeds and fates of his ancestors and without a profound realization of his responsibility for the place of his birth—a great gift without which he would not be the person that he is.”

This is what Valentin Rasputin has to say about the places of his childhood and youth in Siberia, the land where he presently lives and works as a writer.

Our television crew paid a visit to Rasputin in the summer. The earth in Irkutsk had been warmed by the sun; the verdant islands in the middle of the calm Angara cheered the eye; and the mighty river seemed

to divide the city into two unequal parts: old and new.

We were well aware of the fact that Rasputin dislikes speaking in public. He is reticent to say anything at all about himself, and his television appearances are extremely rare, indeed. Perhaps this is because he is a very reserved person, in external appearance, even stern. His features are mild, but on occasion, his expression becomes hard and impulsive with not even a hint of a smile. The most arresting feature of his hardened face are his dark eyes, filled with concern, concealed pain, and profound concentration which are reflections of the constant thought process, accessible to no one, in which he is engaged.

"Literature is responsible for everything that happens to man," the writer once remarked. When you look at Rasputin and converse with him, it seems these words are intended above all as a reminder to himself.

We did our shooting on the shores of the Angara River, along the road to Lake Baikal—an amazingly beautiful place. If you peer into the distance, through the fog you can barely make out the blurred silhouettes of a tiny village huddled on the shore. The village seems to be half underwater and is reminiscent somehow of the one he described in his novella *Farewell to Matyora*.

"Perhaps we are standing on that very shore," I began. "Matyora... Was there really such a village, or was it sheer invention on your part?"

"It was actually a composite image of sorts," the writer replied. "Although there were many villages on the islands of the Angara, and there is such a name as Matyora. In fact, it is one of the oldest and most widespread throughout all of Russia—not just in

Siberia and on the Angara. Of course, I chose it for a reason, since every name, just like every surname must mean something. Surnames of characters must be chosen with care, and all the more so the name of an old village standing on ancient ground. It should represent the roots and distinctive character of that village and that land—something which is being lost at present.

“The novella *Farewell to Matyora* was based on material from the Ust-Ilim resettlement, when nothing at all was moved from the territory to be flooded. Even if there was a marvelous, sturdy house that would serve its inhabitants for many more decades, it would be burned to the ground. This all took place before my very eyes, since I travelled to many of these places on the eve of the flooding. It is really a tragic sight when you pass that way in the evening... And I walked those roads in the dark of night, along the Angara and the Ilim which flows into it. The fields there were fine and fertile. ‘Ilim fields’ was a synonym for rich farm lands and the good life in the local idiom, for the area fed not just Irkutsk region but Yakutia as well. They usually had bumper crops, and the peasants there lived well. I will never forget as long as I live how I floated down the Ilim River watching those solidly built villages burn at night. I tried to depict these events and the tragedy of it all as best I could in *Farewell to Matyora*.”

The fog on the Angara thickened, and it began to drizzle. Again, the blurred outline of the lone village on the shore appeared as if in a dream.

“Do you think Matyora will ever surface again, somewhere, sometime?” I asked.

Rasputin reflected upon my question for a while: “Before the dam was built on the Ilim, there were

several small islands in the river from which the trees had not been felled and removed when they were flooded. They rose to the surface some time later and had to be bombed, for they were blocking the flow of the current... What can I say? Will my Matyora ever surface again? I believe that Matyora will be reborn. Not that it will resurface, but that it will be reborn, perhaps in another capacity or form. I believe more firmly in a kind of spiritual and moral Matyora which will appear without a doubt... Otherwise, all our struggles and sufferings are for nothing, and all our efforts are in vain... That is what I must believe in, and I think that my belief is well-founded."

"Your new novella *Fire* is a continuation of *Farewell to Matyora*... What are your plans? Will you continue this theme?"

"Symbolically, *Fire* describes the fate of the new settlement to which the former residents of Matyora moved after their old village was flooded. It shows what happens when all a person's roots are torn up and nothing is left of the land upon which he once lived. He must build a totally new home for himself and establish a new order of things. What effect does such a situation have on human life, morals, and our relation to the land? In the end, we all live on but a single planet, and the new land is just as much ours as the old place was. But if we examine our relations to this land, we seem to consider it less and less our own: we do not value it nearly as much. That is precisely what I wanted to show in *Fire*: the extensive influence our history, our past has on us, and how the past affects the present and future..."

I asked why *Fire* had such a documentary, journalistic ring to it, and wondered whether it was a new trend in his work or if it were just a sign of the times.

"The emotional effect my writing has on the reader is always very important to me," said Rasputin. "I care not only about the effects of the events, the fates of the characters, and the power of the written word: I want my writing to have an emotional, almost electric impact on the reader. Perhaps I have put it crudely, but that is what I mean: I want the effect to be as strong as a blow to the head. The language I used in *Fire* seemed the best means of achieving that end. It did not come to me at once. I pondered over it for a long time, especially at the beginning, in an attempt to find precisely the right sound, the proper syllable, the appropriate style for describing the events of the novella. Finally, I decided that a journalistic, conversational style would be the best. Doubtless, the emphasis on the publicistic style is too strong in places and contains too much straightforwardness which, perhaps, is out of place in a piece of literature. But I did not refrain from allowing this to happen, since the times simply demand such a direct approach."

"Readers have had heated discussions about the main character of *Fire*, Ivan Petrovich. After all, he is just a driver for the lumber works, a simple fellow, as we are wont to say. But his reflections on life are extremely complex, to the point of being philosophical. Are not his thoughts a bit too complicated for such an ordinary person?" I asked.

"This is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that I have been accused of making my simple heroes too complex as individuals. But why must we consider a simple hero to be a primitive one? We seem to think the only thing he should be able to do is work well, while all the complexities of his personality should be connected only with the job he does. His

soul, his inner being must be as definite, straightforward, and simple as the day is long. This is an idea I just can't buy. I was criticized for exactly the same thing when I wrote *Borrowed Time* with old Anna and *Farewell to Matyora* with old Darya. They said Darya was far too philosophical, unnecessarily complex, and too proper and upright. The problem is that we truly know nothing of these old women. We know nothing of these simple people who seem so primitive to us. But they are far from primitive in reality. They make judgements and speak like responsible citizens. And in the final analysis, even if the hero is a simple person, as it seems to us, what is there to stop us from transferring our cares, concerns, and thoughts to him anyway? Why must he be portrayed exactly in that physical and moral state in which we perceive him? What is the purpose of literature, after all? Does artistic truth in literature necessarily have to correspond to that of real life as we understand it? Artistic truth is broad enough to contain everything, including our reflections on life."

I recalled a phrase from one of Rasputin's previous interviews: "Each of us can find something of ourselves in literary figures"... If we imagine the writer's heroes—their lives and fate—we realize that what is most important in each of them is their tireless search for the meaning of their individual existence on earth, their moral and spiritual quests. This is precisely what torments old Anna in *Borrowed Time*, Darya in *Farewell to Matyora*, Nastyona in *Live and Remember*, and Ivan Petrovich in *Fire*...

My next question was: "Is *Fire* a symbolic title?"

"It is not so much a symbolic as an ordinary title," Rasputin replied in a tired voice. "We sometimes seek symbolism where there is none to be had. There was a

fire, so I called the novella *Fire*. But I was referring to the fires raging in human souls as well, for they must be extinguished, too. We must put them out in ourselves and create some order on Earth and within our souls. But we cannot create order within us without spirituality. Those parameters and qualities of spiritual traditions which existed in the past must somehow be restored, albeit gradually.”

“What hopes do you have for literature today? How can it help people become richer morally and spiritually?”

“Literature can do a great deal,” replied Rasputin with conviction, “if given a little help. I mean propaganda and such concepts as economics, because all that is interconnected. Morality is connected first and foremost with economics, as is spirituality. The very spiritual acquisitions literature facilitates are presently being ruined by the economic activities taking place on our planet.

“Take a person on the shores of Lake Baikal, for example. The very fact that he lives there presupposes somehow that he is a clean, honest man. Nature affects us more than we realize. Man becomes purer when he lives in the midst of untrammelled nature but when nature is destroyed, moreover in the most tragic of manners, that affects man first of all, I think. And this is not just my opinion: it is actually the case. So let us take the case of someone living on the shores of Lake Baikal... He was living in a particular state of spiritual and moral oneness with nature when next to him was opened the Baikal pulp-and-paper mill. This former state does not exactly vanish completely, but it is transformed into some other quality, because the pulp-and-paper mill is next to him, a mill that is doing neither Lake Baikal nor the country’s economics any

good, and indeed is economically unprofitable considering the water it is using. Our state suffers an enormous loss from it economically, not to mention the moral losses. Man may not feel the full extent of the loss which is occurring in him daily, even hourly. But nonetheless, this loss continues to occur. How can he be a good citizen and carry out his civic responsibilities, especially if he works at that paper mill? A large number of the mill's employees are local people, after all. A person in such a position becomes divided; he can no longer be at peace or in harmony with himself. Who will win out in this case? The loyal citizen, concerned for the future of his native land, or merely a worker, a simple consumer uselessly living out his days on this earth? Now it is very important that literature point mankind in the proper direction, reminding us of those concepts which are contained in the understanding of a good citizen and his responsibilities. At present, the concept of a good citizen has become rather broad: it can have contradictory meanings. A person struggling to save Lake Baikal can be considered a good citizen, and so can someone who participates, for example, in poisoning the priceless waters of this lake for the so-called economic good of the country. In fact, the common point of view is that the individual who participates in the destruction of Lake Baikal by supporting these poisonous plants is the better citizen. Literature must assist people in the situation of moral and spiritual confusion which presently exists in the world. This confusion is everywhere—not just in our country.”

We spoke of Rasputin's new book *Live and Love*. “Why did you choose this title?” I asked the writer.

“Surely you know the Russian proverb, ‘Live and Learn’. This idea was vital at a certain stage in our

development, but now something else is far more important. Now, we are all literate, scholarly, and a bit over-educated in some ways. But love is sadly lacking in our lives. Having learned everything possible, and impossible, too, having explained absolutely everything, we still can't explain ourselves or be completely moral in the absolute sense that was intended and utterly essential for man. I think it is more important to have a moral foundation now, an ethical desire to serve mankind. How to teach this service is probably the major question at present—question number one. That is, not 'Live and Learn' (though that is also important) but 'Live and Love'. Love what is all around you; love your fellow man; forgive him and try to understand what is happening to him."

"Many critics have noted that you are more inclined to forgive than to condemn your heroes. Nastyona, the heroine of *Live and Remember*, heard a saying somewhere: 'There is no guilt so great it cannot be forgiven...' Do you feel the same way?"

"This is a very complex matter, I daresay. It is much more necessary to understand a person than to condemn him. Understanding frequently leads to forgiveness. But obviously, not everything—far from everything—must be forgiven. Some things can never be forgiven. For me, one of them has become the civic position of the individual today: whether or not he is concerned about what is being done with his native land. Sometimes, one's land is desecrated unknowingly; but at other times, it seems to me that this desecration is deliberate. In neither case are such acts forgiveable."

"In the novella *Up and Down the River*, the following episode occurs: the hero remembers a dream in

which an old man whose death he described appears and reproaches him: 'Never try to bite off more than you can chew...' "

Rasputin thought for a moment, then replied: "You should probably do whatever is within your means and not try to accomplish what clearly exceeds your capabilities. But as far as such dreams are concerned, it seems to me that the writer must see and feel beyond the realm of his own time. After all, sometimes you want to listen to those who inhabited the earth before you were born or to those who will come after you... We must hear their voices and imagine that we are listening to those who have already vanished from the face of this earth. Perhaps they know the whole truth about things. Perhaps they have discovered some great truths, and if that is the case, how could it be possible that this truth has vanished with them? Must not it come down to us in some form or other? And to whom must it come if not to the artist or writer? This is the purpose of our existence, after all. Moreover, something sublime must fill us from above and below. Fortunately, we are able to respond to this..."

"Towards evening, we went to the writer's cottage on the Angara, not far from Lake Baikal. I asked him if he worked in the evenings.

"No, not really," Rasputin replied. "I am already of an age when I have to set aside time for reading, particularly for such writers as Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy, or for the Russian philosopher Fyodorov. Serious reading requires free time set aside especially for that purpose, so I devote my evenings to this activity."

"You once said that a good book should unify. What did you mean by that?"

"A good book should unite like-minded readers. Many popular novels do not appeal to good taste in general. If a book has a great deal of spiritual energy, the people who read it will unconsciously become like-minded. It would be good if there were more books capable of evoking genuine unity so it would exist precisely in this context."

"Do you believe in the spiritual potential of contemporary man?"

"I believe simply in the spiritual possibilities and potential of man. Very little has been discovered about the limits of human potential as yet. We use only a small part of what is available. We do not know ourselves very well, and we make poor use of our capabilities: we don't know how to get to the heart of the matter, although the possibilities are simply enormous."

"What qualities do you value in people?"

"I value decency and a sense of conscience in a person. Quite often, conscience is lost in the shuffle and replaced by something incomprehensible. At present, awareness is very important. It is essential to be aware of what is going on in the world, to try to make some sense of the enormous tangle of concepts and heaps of various ideas with which we are confronted. A person must have some understanding of all this."

"Do many readers write to you, and do you answer their letters?"

"I receive a large number of letters, and it is impossible to answer them all. But there are letters which cannot be ignored, because they are extremely open and sincere. I am glad to have received of late many letters about problems which concern not only me and Soviet literature, but our society as a

whole. These are problems of ecology, matters concerning what we refer to as the qualities of a person. We are always talking about the perfection of mankind. But how can we become better people? Some of the letters I receive are extremely interesting. Moreover, many of them are far-reaching in ideas and are worthy of consideration at the highest levels of government. It would be a good idea to publish a book of readers' letters to writers—not just to me, of course, but to many other writers. It would be interesting to put together such an anthology, and I am quite sure it would go over well with the reading public.”

At the end of our discussion, I asked Rasputin how he liked to spend his free time.

“I like to do nothing at all,” the writer answered. “I like to just get up and go somewhere. I don’t have any hobbies at all, and I never suffer from loneliness... No matter where I am—in the taiga or anywhere else—I never need a transistor radio or a television set. Sometimes I don’t even need any books.”

“What about someone to talk with?”

“I need someone to talk with least of all. I think a person should be able to talk and converse with himself, because the main dialog, the most important, open, and useful conversation is the one he has when he is alone with himself.”

As we were flying back from Irkutsk to Moscow, images of the Angara River, Lake Baikal, and everything we had seen and heard seemed to follow us on our way.

“Do you believe that you are a major writer?” I asked Rasputin during a break in the shooting.

“No...” he replied with a smile. “I believe I’m an honest writer. And that means a lot, I think...”

REQUEST TO READERS

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